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Claudia Louis

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**Invisible no More: AfroLatina/o Undergraduate Student's Sense of  
Belonging and Persistence at a Small Urban Northeastern College**

**Committee:**

---

Victor B. Sáenz, Supervisor

---

Larry D. Roper

---

Martha Menchaca

---

Patricia Somers

---

Mark A. Gooden

**Invisible no More: AfroLatina/o Undergraduate Student's Sense of  
Belonging and Persistence at a Small Urban Northeastern College**

by

**Claudia Louis, B.A., B.S., M.A.**

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## **Dedication**

*Para mi papi que arriesgo su vida ves tras ves para darnos un mejor futuro. A mi mama por ser fuerte y arriesgadora.* To my loving and supportive husband and my brilliant daughter Viktoria – who inspired this study and served as the catalyst for me to finish strong. I am grateful for my *familia* and those who invested in me along the way. I will forever be grateful. Finally, to the 12 study participants who shared their personal stories of pain, joy, and resilience – *gracias! No tengo como pagarles.*

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# **Invisible no More: AfroLatina/o Undergraduate Student's Sense of Belonging and Persistence at a Small Urban Northeastern College**

by

Claudia Louis, PhD.

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SUPERVISOR: Victor B. Saenz

Latina/os are the fastest growing demographic group in the United States but deterministic views of race and ethnicity have created a habitual way of assessing Latina/os in social science research – including higher education. This homogenous approach overlooks the racial and ethnic diversity of Latina/os who yield from 21 different countries from around the world. Thus, AfroLatina/o students have been overlooked in higher education research. This study utilized qualitative research methods and a phenomenological approach in order to gain an in-depth understanding of how AfroLatina/o college students at a small, commuter, urban, public institution in the Northeastern United States mold their racial and ethnic identities, how they negotiate in-group acceptance, and how the prior two impact their academic persistence. Three key findings emerged from this study: (1) AfroLatina/o student mold their own identities by reflecting on their experiences of pain and rejection, (2) their group membership is contingent on many factors not just phenotype or language, and (3) their academic persistence is impacted by their urban environment more than other factors.

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study**

The social investment in racial differences has established a fictitious and unscientific “biological” difference between humans. “The validity of race as a scientific concept has been discredited by anthropologist, biologists, and geneticists alike” (Khanna, 2011, p. ix). Nonetheless, the myth of racial differences persists and is accepted as a scientific and indisputable fact around the world. In the United States, discourse around racial and ethnic matters has historically been a taboo subject. Most recently, however, news outlets have been filled with reports about civil discontent and demands for racial and social justice. Yet, despite race becoming the subject of increased interest in the U.S., the social investment in racial and ethnic differences has not dissipated. On the contrary, it has reinforced monoracial and monoethnic systems which places Blacks on one side and Whites on the other (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Rodriguez, 2000), effectively eliminating all others from the conversation. The social investment in racial differences has permeated every sector of society, including education. Historically, racial beliefs of White superiority subjugated non-Whites to substandard schooling (Menchaca, 1997), limited access to resources (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Sundstrom, 2008), and have sustained a limited view of human diversity. In higher education, student demographics are reported through the adoption of federal racial and ethnic categories that fail to capture intra-group diversity, effectively thrusting some students into invisibility due to their perceived membership in heterogeneous racial and ethnic groups.

Strict homogenous racial categories have established and maintained a Black-White binary, which is damaging and marginalizing to non-Black people of color.

Sundstrom (2008) suggests the binary “does not engender accurate descriptions of the United States’ racial past or present, and it skews discussions of the future of race and racial justice toward the perspectives and interests of blacks and whites” (p. 66). This anachronistic approach of viewing human diversity has systematically controlled how individuals are perceived and assessed by researchers. In higher education, much like in other social science fields, individuals are considered through a monoracial stance, perpetrating the rhetoric that individuals fit within pre-ascribed racial and ethnic categories. Although research seeks to be comprehensive and all encompassing, the adoption and perpetration that monoracial categories are authentic, force double-minorities into invisibility. Thus, not only does racial discourse largely ignore non-Black people of color, it also upholds an obsolescent perspective of human diversity and ignores the changing U. S. demographics – in particular Latina/o diversity.

The 2010 Census revealed Latina/os accounted for more than half of the total U. S. growth and demonstrated an increase four times the national rate between 2000 and 2010 (United States Census Bureau, 2011). Yet, their population growth is nothing new or an unknown fact. Latina/os have demonstrated a 592% growth since 1970, “by comparison, the U. S. population overall has grown 56% over the same period. Between 2000 and 2010 alone, Hispanics made up more than half of U. S. population growth” (Krogstad, 2014, p. 1). This growth is evident in all segments of society including education where Latina/o students “make up nearly one-quarter (23.9%) of the nation’s public school enrollment, up from one-fifth (19.9%) in 2005 and 16.7% in 2000” (Fry & Lopez, 2012, p. 6). Yet, factors such as nation of origin, generational status, primary

language spoken, range of acculturation, cultural affinity, and physical appearance does not permit their grouping. When Latina/os are clustered into an ethnic group, their heterogeneity is ignored, leading to overbroad generalizations about their experiences. In addition, the Black-White binary has largely disregarded Latina/os in race conversations and their diversity is often overlooked in research.

The conspicuous oversight of the fastest growing demographic group has recently captured the attention of some researchers (i. e., Amaro & Zambrana, 2000; Bensimon & Dowd, 2009; Forbes, 2010; Fry & Gonzales, 2008; Hirschman, Alba, & Farley, 2000; Jiménez Román & Flores, 2010; Passel & Cohn, n.d.; Rodriguez, 2000; Solorzano, Villalpando, & Oseguera, 2005) who understand the implications at hand. Their research comprises a growing body of literature that critically assesses the experiences of Latina/os and stresses the urgency of acknowledging their heterogeneity.

Rodriguez (2000) asserts the racial binary largely ignores Latina/os and causes a detrimental omission of their heterogeneity.

The imposition of the black-white racial order on Latinos separates them into ‘whites’ and ‘blacks’ and in the process attempts to create new African Americans and so-called hyphenated (European) Americans. Latinos understand this phenomenon as their being identified racially but not culturally. ...Consequently, today Latinos are pressured to be categorized according to their color rather than their national heritage and culture. (pp. 56-57)

Census data reveal that when it comes to racial identification, Latina/os overwhelmingly identify as “other” due to their racial diversity and panethnic views of racial categories (Amaro & Zambrana, 2000; Bennett, 2000; Rodriguez, 2000). The terms Latina/o and Hispanic have in effect been racialized, propelling many Latina/os to reject such terms

and monoracial categories. Yet, despite Latina/o racial diversity, AfroLatina/os find themselves excluded due to their prominent African features and dark skin (Cruz-Janzen, 2001, 2002; Flores & Jiménez Román, 2009). Thus, AfroLatino/s experience paramount obstacles in their attempt to gain in-group acceptance and recognition as a cohesive group within the U. S. racial binary. The amalgamation of the social construction of race, skin color, racialization of Latina/os, and racism have constructed a fictitious image of what Latina/os look like, effectively pushing AfroLatina/os into invisibility.

Demographic shifts on college campuses tend to mirror those of the nation. In 2011, college enrollment went up by three percent from 2010 and “growth in the number of young Hispanics attending college accounted for the majority of the increase” (Fry & Lopez, 2012, p. 4). In the same year, “the number of 18-to 24-year-old Hispanics enrolled in college exceeded 2 million and reached a record 16.5% share of all college enrollments (Fry & Lopez, 2012, p. 7). Accordingly, in order for college administrators, faculty, and staff to appropriately serve the growing Latina/o student population, their heterogeneity must be considered and understood.

The purpose of this study was twofold, first to illustrate how identity development impacts in-group sense of belonging for AfroLatina/o students and second, to understand if in-group sense of belonging influences their academic persistence. AfroLatina/os are a double-minority group and have traditionally been ignored in higher education research partially due to the habitual monoracial approach researchers have adopted. Given the investigation of AfroLatina/os in higher education is an emerging area; this study seeks to make a valuable contribution to the field of higher education by conveying the



experiences of AfroLatina/o college students. I understand that findings cannot be generalized to all AfroLatina/os but I hope this study helps identify commonalities among study participants that will initiate the conversation around serving their needs, and to illuminate their lived experiences as separate and distinct to *mestiza/os*.

In summary, the study of AfroLatina/o undergraduate, upperclassmen student's in-group sense of belonging and persistence employed a conceptual framework reconciling academic outcomes, sense of belonging, Black-Latina/o race relations, and the social construction of race. Although demographic factors such as nation of origin, language, generational status, cultural affinity, degree of acculturation, and so forth are difficult to conceptualize into a single variable (due to the heterogeneity of Latina/os), I gathered this information through a demographic questionnaire (Appendix A) in order to better understand their experiences. A more detailed description of why demographic factors are important is provided in Chapter 2. A depiction of what type of information is gathered through the demographic questionnaire is included in Chapter 3 and 4.

The remainder of this introductory chapter includes the statement of the problem, purpose of the study, research questions, a brief overview of the methodology, definition of key terms, delimitations and limitations, assumptions, and significance of the study.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Identity is incredibly complex, fluid, and multilayered making it very difficult to generalize a singular process. AfroLatina/os visibly appear Black, but culturally they could identify as Latina/o, American, Black, or a combination of all three – simultaneously or switch based on location. Researchers in higher education have studied

students of color (SOC) through a monoracial lens ignoring the ramifications of reducing a diverse group into a homogeneous ethnic category. This approach has systematically ignored the racial diversity of Latina/os and sustains a stereotypical image of who qualifies as Latina/o. In effect, AfroLatina/os have been largely ignored in research and their experiences continue to be understudied. In fact, I have conducted consistent EBSCO searches since May 2014 utilizing various combinations of the following words: “AfroLatino,” “Afro Latinos,” “Afronegros,” “Afrohispanic” “Afrodescendents” “College,” “University,” and “Higher Education.” Every single search has turned up zero results. Googlescholar searches conducted with the same words yielded results but they were not pertinent to higher education. Given the dearth of research on the experiences of AfroLatina/os in higher education, the purpose of this study was to contribute to the body of literature on students of color in higher education by focusing on the experiences of AfroLatina/o college students.

Researchers in fields like anthropology, sociology, cultural studies, Latin American studies, and psychology have conducted research on the social-cultural experiences of AfroLatina/os in the United States and Latin America (i. e., Barnett, 2011; Coleman, 2014; Flores & Jiménez Román, 2009; Gosin, 2009; Jiménez Román & Flores, 2010; Kifer, 2013; Perry, 2008; Rivera, 2011; Romo, 2008, 2011; Seelke, 2008; Villarreal, 2010; Wade, 1995; Weyland, n.d.; Zamora, 2013). The extant literature has identified the following factors as instrumental in understanding the experiences of AfroLatina/os in the United States; (1) skin color: an emphasis is placed on Whiteness as desired and Blackness is rejected, (2) language: speaking Spanish makes them “more

Latina/o,” (3) nation of origin: the acknowledgment of African ancestry varies by Latin American country of origin, (4) generational status: younger generations tend to be more accepting of their Blackness, (5) immigrant status: new immigrants tend to have a different perspective on cultural/ethnic identity, (6) cultural affinity: those who have a strong affinity to their nation of origin also have a stronger affinity to their Latina/o identity, and (7) self-identification: identity is fluid and can change based on environment, social dynamics, location, and age, among other factors.

The extant literature, however, overlooks a few distinctions that warrant additional attention. First, geographic region: is there a critical mass of self-identified AfroLatina/os in the area? Having a critical mass of AfroLatina/os in a concentrated geographic area may influence their social experiences. Second, family’s nation of origin: there are two distinct groupings within the AfroLatina/os community, those born to AfroLatina/o parents from Latin American (or Latina/o ancestry), and those born to one Latina/o parent and one African American parent. This distinction is particularly important because familial relations and home culture, among other variables, heavily influence their social experiences and self-identification. Third, level of assimilation: some are resistant to assimilate while others find it best in order to fit in to larger society. The amalgamation of the aforementioned variables makes the study of AfroLatina/os a challenging process. Thus, in order to understand their experiences on college campuses, a targeted analysis of the historical significance of race in the United States must be considered – in addition to Latin American notions of Latinidad and Blackness. Most

AfroLatina/os do not consider themselves biracial or multiracial, and thus, the section below provides an overview of this phenomenon.

**Not Biracial or Multiracial.** The mixed-race and multiracial student population continues to grow on college campuses and is expected to continue increasing (Brackett et al., 2006; Carter, 2010; Kellogg & Niskodé, 2008; King, 2008; Nishimura, 1998; Ozaki & Johnston, 2008; Phinney & Alipuria, 1996; Wong & Buckner, 2008). Since AfroLatina/os are a synthesis of the two largest minority groups in the U. S., most researchers cluster them into multiracial, biracial, or mixed race student groups. Nonetheless, their inclusion in those groupings ignores what Flores and Jiménez Román (2009) term, the triple-consciousness of AfroLatina/os:

Afro-Latino is at the personal level a unique and distinctive experience and identity, ranging as it does among and between Latino, Black, and US American dimensions of lived social reality. In their quest for a full and appropriate sense of social identity, Afro-Latinos are thus typically pulled in three directions at once, and share a complex, multi-dimensional optic on contemporary society. In another writing we have termed this three-pronged web of affiliations, taking our cue from W. E. B. DuBois, 'triple-consciousness'. (p. 321)

This study seeks to present the experiences of AfroLatina/os as unique and distinct. In fact, AfroLatina/os are not biracial, multiracial, Black, or Latina/o alone but rather a rich historical amalgamation of the different races from around the world. Vasconcelos (1966), a Mexican philosopher, more closely captured their identity as comprising *la raza cósmica*, *mestiza/os*, or *la raza de cobre*. His thesis posits Latina/os are a combination of the four main races in the world (Asians, Blacks, Native Americans, and Whites); such amalgamation also included spiritual and cultural factors. Although Vasconcelos posits a philosophical belief of the new racial mixture, which comprises the widely accepted

Latina/o identity of *mestiza/o*, there was in effect an inherent motivation to move towards a lighter skinned-European *mestiza/o*. Regardless, *mestizaje* is accepted as a unifying identity throughout Latin America – as long as an individual is not seen as too dark.

The combination of *mestizaje* and panethnic identity of Latina/os in the United States makes their inclusion into the biracial, multiracial, or mixed-race categories disingenuous. The important historical, cultural, and contemporary social-political realities of this group would be overlooked. Nonetheless, similarly problematic is the clustering of non-Whites students into a single category of students of color (SOC). The clustering of all SOC could lead to overgeneralizations about their experiences and also upholds a dangerous dichotomy, which places Whites as separate from all others. In effect, being a SOC on campus does not translate into synonymous experiences nor does it mean they have anything in common. Nonetheless, the way they are perceived and treated on campus by White peers and administrators can lead to shared experiences, not because all SOC are the same, but rather due to the blanket SOC designation.

**Students of Color.** Studies in higher education indicate that SOC persist when they feel a strong sense of belonging (Berger, 1997; Freeman, Anderman, & Jensen, 2007; Hausmann, Schofield, & Woods, 2007; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Johnson et al., 2007; Maestas, Vaquera, & Zehr, 2007; Strayhorn, 2008, 2012), find community or an affinity group (Crisp & Nora, 2010; Johnson et al., 2007; Ozaki & Johnston, 2008), and perceive a positive campus climate (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Hurtado, Carter, & Spuler, 1996; Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pedersen, & Allen, 1998; Hurtado & Ponjuán, 2005; Locks, Hurtado, Bowman, & Oseguera, 2008). Yet, the extant literature examines the

experiences of SOC through a monoracial stance or by clumping all mixed-race students into a single “multicultural and/or biracial” category. Both approaches fail to adequately conceptualize the AfroLatina/o student experience. Their inclusion under the Latina/o ethnicity simply overlooks their African ancestry and vice versa.

The term AfroLatina/o is the observable fusion of the conscious acknowledgment of being both Black and Latina/o. Flores and Jiménez Román (2009) suggest in order to adequately conceptualize the term AfroLatina/o within the U. S. context, one needs to comprehend the following four theoretical constructs:

[1] The tradition of the group of Afro-Latinos themselves, [2] the transnational discourse or ethnoscape, [3] the historical and ongoing relationship between Latinos and African Americans, and [4] the distinctive phenomenological experience of what it means to be both Black *and* Latino in this country. (p. 321)

The clustering of AfroLatina/o students into the Latina/o category disregards their Black identity and including them in the biracial/multiracial group negates their cultural and ethnic history. All groupings disregard their unique experience of being a Black and Latina/o hybrid within the United States cultural context. While research demonstrates SOC tend to experience college similarly, not one student demographic group is analogous to AfroLatina/o. The consolidation of all the aforementioned factors as well as their experiences of SOC on a college campuses, command the study of AfroLatina/o college students be commenced through the adoption of a critical, race conscious approach. Race, ethnicity, and culture are central to their experiences and must be considered as primary factors both on and off campus.

In summary, the heterogeneity of Latina/os in combination with their rapid population growth demand that researchers approach the study of AfroLatina/os through an innovative method. Since Latina/os are the fastest growing demographic group in the United States, and are projected to be the majority by 2050 (Fry & Gonzales, 2008), there is an ethnical obligation to better understand the breadth of their multiplicity. Yet, little is known about their racial diversity, cultural underpinnings, and extent of their social experiences. The Black-White binary systematically forces non-Blacks out of the race conversation but AfroLatina/os are caught in the middle – at once not Black-American enough but also not Latina/o. At the same time, their categorization in the multicultural, biracial, and/or mixed-race groups would oversimplify their experiences. More research is required on the unique experiences of AfroLatina/o students, only then will college campuses be prepared to adequately welcome them to campus.

### **Purpose of the Study**

Given the intersectionality of culture, nation of origin, level of assimilation, language, phenotype, and social political climate, AfroLatina/os find themselves in a constant identity negotiation process. Although intersectionality is important to consider in the study of AfroLatina/os, this study did not utilize intersectionality as a framework but rather simply acknowledge the importance of intersectionality of identities in understanding the experiences of AfroLatina/o students. I was interested in understanding how individuals make sense of their AfroLatinidad at the personal level. Hence, a phenomenological approach was utilized. The synthesis of being both Black and Latina/o in the United States pivots them into a historic rivalry between the two groups, often

forcing them to choose one or the other. Social-cultural factors add to the complexity of identity development and persistence of AfroLatina/os, therefore, I employed a critical perspective by acknowledging the important role race has played in the field of education. In order to methodically understand the contemporary experiences of SOC in education, one must acknowledge the painful history of their exclusion in all sectors of society – including public education.

Although formal public education was offered by the states in 1825, “there is no evidence indicating that they [SOC] were included in the public education system during the nineteenth century. On the contrary, the states passed school funding laws to ensure that blacks and other racial minorities would not be schooled” (Menchaca, 1997, p. 36). Such historical accounts indicate that the right to an education was not extended to all students. In effect, unleashing a historical legacy of injustice and exclusion of SOC from public education. Valencia (1997) asserts school segregation was based on racist beliefs.

There is considerable evidence that the ideological foundations of school segregation date back to the racial beliefs of the nineteenth century that white supremacy practices were predicated on the belief that colored races were biologically inferior and racial mixing would contaminate whites. (p. 4)

Regardless of the reasoning behind racial discrimination in education, the long-term consequences are still being felt by their descendants. This study implemented a critical perspective through the conscious acknowledgment of how racial discrimination in education continues to affect SOC. In the case of AfroLatina/os, the tumultuous history of Blacks in the United States in combination with the unfavorable perspective of Latina/os situates them in a unique disposition. Not only do they comprise the synthesis



of both groups but an unfavorable history also impacts contemporary notions of their academic ability and potential.

Latina/os and African Americans “are frequently counter-posed and pitted against one another in a kind of race for demographic supremacy as the ‘largest minority’” (Flores & Jiménez Román, 2009, p. 319). At the same time, AfroLatina/os can encounter rejection from Latina/os due to their prominent African features (Cruz-Janzen, 2001; Romo, 2011) as well as from Blacks due to their Latina/o identity (Flores & Jiménez Román, 2009; Romo, 2011). The aforementioned amounts to what I termed the AfroLatina/o paradox, they encounter a double-rejection for being the synthesis of the two largest minority groups in the United States – Black and Latina/o. As such, their quest to find in-group sense of belonging is more complex than that of students who fit into monoracial categories.

Literature on college students sense of belonging is extensive and researchers (see Crisp & Nora, 2010; Hurtado & Ponjuán, 2005; Johnson et al., 2007; Terrell L. Strayhorn, 2008, 2012) have identified a relationship between sense of belonging and persistence (chapter two will establish this). When assessing student sense of belonging and persistence, the double-rejection that AfroLatina/os experience could position them in a distinctive category that certainly warrants careful investigation. This study contributes to the existing body of research on Latina/o students but identifies how AfroLatina/os experience sense of belonging on campus differently than their *mestizo* peers – demystifying the myth of Latina/o homogeneity. Researchers traditionally approach student inquiry through a contemporary, race-neutral perspective, and by doing

so they omit important historical context that is needed to understand contemporary issues. Thus, this study incorporated a transnational perspective on race – recognizing the heterogeneity of Latina/os. I relied heavily on historical facts in order to capture the experiences of AfroLatina/o undergraduate students through the acknowledgment that history matters. The blending of history, race, identity, and heterogeneity of Latina/os in the study of higher education yielded more comprehensive findings about AfroLatina/o students and their unique experiences on campus.

In summary, research demonstrates sense of belonging is highly correlated with persistence for all students but this factor is even more important for SOC (Hausmann et al., 2007, 2007; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Strayhorn, 2010, 2012; Strayhorn, 2008). However, little is known about how AfroLatina/os negotiate in-group acceptance. Research in higher education has traditionally studied Latina/o students as a homogenous group. Nonetheless, Latina/os are both racially and ethnically diverse. Therefore, the experiences of Latina/o subgroup members have been understudied and overlooked. This study contributes to the higher education persistence literature by investigating the experiences of AfroLatina/o undergraduate college students. It also makes a valuable contribution to the identity development literature by attempting to conceptualize how AfroLatina/os mold their racial and ethnic identities within a highly racialized society. The study was conducted on a small, public, commuter, and urban college campus in the Northeastern United States. I recruit participants who were beyond their first year of college in order to capture their persistence into second year enrollment.

I intentionally applied a critical lens throughout the study since social-political factors can position AfroLatina/os as outsiders from Latina/o and U. S. Black communities. In addition, it provided a much-needed critical perspective into the racialization of AfroLatina/os. I wanted to understand why AfroLatina/os are pushed into invisibility and noted as unworthy of acknowledgment in educational research. The social invisibility and rejection of AfroLatina/os may extend to college campuses but the lack of research in this area only allows us to generalize. Thus, AfroLatina/o students need to be understood and assessed as distinct from other Latina/os; only then will researchers be able to appropriately and responsibly understand how historical and contemporary views of race impact their college persistence.

### **Research Question**

The three overarching research questions guiding this study were:

1. How do AfroLatina/o college students mold their racial, ethnic, and/or cultural identities? Does history play a role?
2. How do AfroLatina/o undergraduate students at a small, urban public college, negotiate in-group acceptance?
3. What social and cultural factors do AfroLatina/o college students share that impact their persistence?

Given the study of AfroLatina/os in higher education is an emerging field, these three research questions were informed by the relevant literature on AfroLatina/os in other social science fields as well as SOC research in higher education. The first question seeks to understand the process they undergo in molding and/or arriving at their racial and

ethnic identity within the United States. Given the complexities and contradictions the Latina/o category produces for AfroLatina/os, their identity development could be better understood as panethnic and/or panracial. Some believe “Latino identity is a panethnic product of the struggles shared by various Spanish-speaking ethnic and racial groups born of different national and cultural traditions” (Adams, 2001, p. 222), but AfroLatina/o panethnicity is unique to the historically specific treatment endured in Latin American and the United States. I sought to understand how AfroLatina/o students arrive at their self-ascribed racial and ethnic identity within a highly racialized society.

The second question attempts to understand their unique experiences as they seek to establish a community of peers on campus. The literature posits AfroLatina/os might encounter a double-rejection (from both African Americans and Latina/os) due to the intersectionality of their identities (Cruz-Janzen, 2002; Romo, 2011), and higher education literature asserts belonging to a social group increases student persistence (Strayhorn, 2012). If AfroLatina/o students encounter rejection and/or difficulty in finding a social group on campus, their persistence could be negatively impacted. In addition, SOC tend to gravitate towards culturally relevant affinity groups, student organizations, and social circles (Crisp & Nora, 2010; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Hurtado & Ponjuán, 2005). Yet, little is known about how AfroLatina/os negotiate group acceptance and how their ethnic, racial, and cultural identities impact their sense of belonging on campus.

The third questions is closely linked to sense of belonging but a plethora of other factors can also influence persistence. For example, factors such as socio-economic

status, home structure, tuition affordability, transportation, and employment status have been found to limit Latina/o students' persistence (Crisp & Nora, 2010; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Hurtado & Ponjuán, 2005; Reason, 2009; Strayhorn, 2008; Strayhorn, 2010). While it is probable that AfroLatina/os may encounter similar obstacles as the overall Latina/o student population, I was unable to find any studies on AfroLatina/os students and their academic persistence that could effectively establish this link. As such, the third research question yielded information about the persistence of AfroLatina/os in higher education and contributes to a more nuanced understanding about Latina/os in higher education. Overall, this study contributes to identity development literature since self-identification was central to the study.

### **Brief Overview of Methodology and Procedures**

A qualitative research design with a phenomenological approach was employed for this study. Qualitative researchers tend to “view social life in terms of processes rather than in static terms,” “provide a holistic perspective within explained contexts,” and “use personal insight while taking a non-judgmental stance” (Snape & Spencer, 2012, p. 4). These methodological approaches were ideal for this study given the emphasis on identity development, sense of belonging, and persistence of AfroLatina/o students. In addition, adopting a critical perspective was central to the study given the emphasis on the importance of race and ethnicity in higher education. Mertens (2010) asserts “an important role of qualitative research is uncovering the systemic presence of racism reflected in student selection and placement processes, ethnocentric curricular, and racist attitudes and discriminatory behaviors that impact school achievement” (p.

227). These qualities are essential in understanding the experiences of AfroLatina/o students and their persistence.

Prior to conducting the study I had a clear understanding that social life – just like identity – is in constant motion and extremely fluid. The study of AfroLatina/o students in higher education required that I understood how social-political factors impact their lived experiences, both on and off campus. In order to gain this type of insight, qualitative researchers conduct interviews that provide an in-depth understanding of what it means to embody the identity of AfroLatinidad and being a college student. Qualitative research explores the phenomena at hand through the inclusion of social and material circumstances, histories, experiences, beliefs, and values (Mertens, 2010). Thus, a qualitative research design was appropriate for this study of AfroLatina/o college student's sense of belonging and persistence in higher education.

A phenomenological research approach was implemented in order to gain in-depth insight into how AfroLatina/o students negotiate in-group sense of belonging and how that may impacts their academic persistence. Most importantly, it provided great insight into the personal process they underwent (or are undergoing) in molding their ethnic, racial, and cultural identities. Phenomenology aids in exploring “how human beings make sense of their experience and transform experience into consciousness, both individually and as a shared meaning” (Patton, 2002, p. 104). In order to gather such data, researchers undertake in-depth interviews with those who have experienced the phenomena of interest (Creswell, 2009; Patton, 2002). Thus, phenomenology was employed in the study. I conducted one-on-one interviews with participants utilizing

semi-structured questions informed by relevant literature. In addition, some participants also partook in a focus group where open-ended questions were asked in a group setting. Study participants were recruited through an initial purposeful sampling method followed by a snowball design in a targeted region, particularly because AfroLatina/os tend to congregate in large urban areas on the East Coast.

Census data indicated that the largest concentration of AfroLatina/os is located in the Bronx, New York (United States Census Bureau, 2011). Therefore, the study was conducted at a small, urban, commuter, and public college in the Northeastern United States. Initially, a homogenous sample design was implemented in the recruitment of participants. Since I did not reside in the region where the study was conducted, snowball sampling was also implemented in order to recruit more participants. The use of both sampling methods yielded a greater number of participants. Two distinct theoretical frameworks were employed to assess the experiences of AfroLatina/o students: colorism (Walker, 1983) and borderlands theory (Anzaldúa, 2007). Colorism allows for a critical analysis of how phenotype (skin color gradient) impacts in-group acceptance.

Borderlands theory provides a framework from which to assess the constant identity negotiation AfroLatina/os encounter in the United States. Chapter 2 explores both colorism and borderlands further. Chapter 3 provides a more detailed explanation of the methods administered in this study.

### **Definition of Terms**

A variety of terms (i. e., Hispanic, Latino, and Spanish surnamed) are used in governmental reports and research when referring to Latina/os, however, for the purposes

of this study, I use the term Latina/o as an all-inclusive term for this ethnic group.

Chapter 2 provides a more detailed explanation of why a significant number of Latina/os reject “Hispanic” and/or “Spanish surnamed” as an identity. Although a variety of terms (i. e., Afrodescendent, Negro, Afrolatinoamericano, morenos) exist for describing Black-Latina/os, I utilize AfroLatina/o for the purposes of this study, particularly because leading scholars (i. e. Miriam Jiménez Román, Juan Flores, Rebecca Romo, Marta Cruz-Janzen, etc.) on Afrodescendents in the U. S. prefer this term. A list of key terms utilized in this dissertation are listed below along with an appropriate definition:

*AfroLatina/o*: the term “Afro-Latin@ has surfaced as a way to signal racial, cultural, and socioeconomic contradictions within the overly vague idea of Latin@. In addition to reinforcing those ever-active transnational ties, the Afro-Latin@ concept calls attention to the anti-Black racism within the Latin@ communities themselves” (Jiménez Román & Flores, 2010, p. 2).

*Black-White binary*: “The most pervasive and powerful paradigm of race in the United States is the Black/White binary paradigm. I defined this paradigm as the conception that race in America consists, either exclusively or primarily, of only two constituent racial groups, the Black and the White” (Perea, 1997. p. 1219).

*Colorism*: Alice Walker coined the term colorism and since then a variety of definitions have been proposed, but for the purposes of this study the definition provided by Harvey, Banks, and Tennial, (2014) was utilized:

Colorism is the allocation of privilege and disadvantage according to the lightness or darkness of one’s skin. The implications of colorism extend across multiple



levels of analyses for black Americans, from the intrapersonal, to the interpersonal, to the intragroup, and ultimately to the intergroup. (p. 198)

*Ethnicity:* There are numerous definitions for ethnicity, the word is often utilized interchangeably with race, but for the purposes of this study the definition established by Bradby (1995) was utilized.

‘Ethnicity’ is defined as the real, or probable, or in some cases mythical, common origins of a people who may also have visions of a shared destiny which are manifested in terms of the ideal or actual language, religion, work, diet, or family patterns of those people. (p. 406)

*Latina/o or Hispanic:*

Are those people who classified themselves in one of the specific Spanish, Hispanic, or Latino categories listed on the Census 2010 questionnaire- “Mexican,” “Puerto Rican,” or “Cuban” – as well as those who indicate that they are “another Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin” are those whose origins are from Spain, the Spanish-speaking countries of Central or South America, or the Dominican Republic. The terms “Hispanic,” “Latino,” and “Spanish” are used interchangeably. Origin can be viewed as the heritage, nationality group, lineage, or country of birth of the person or the person’s parents or ancestors before their arrival in the United States. (United States Census Bureau, n.d.)

*Persistence:* has been defined a number of ways but for the purposes of this study persistence was defined as the process of persevering and continuing toward an intended degree goal (Crisp & Nora, 2010).

*Race:* Two definitions were merged in order to best delineate the significance of race in this dissertation. Given the social construction and complexity of the term, the definition proposed by these two authors adequately captures the researchers’ understanding of the term. Haney López (1994) defines “‘race’ as a vast group of people loosely bound together by historically contingent, socially significant elements of their

morphology and/or ancestry” (p. 7). Bell, Castañeda, and Zúñiga (2010) define race as the following:

Race is a sociopolitical not a biological construct, one that is created and reinforced by social and institutional norms and practices, as well as individual attitudes and behaviors. [It] emerged historically in the United States to justify the dominance peoples define as ‘White’ (colonists/settlers) held over other peoples defined as ‘non-White’ (first Native Americans and enslaved Africans and later Mexicans, Chinese, Puerto Ricans, and South Asians and other racialized as non-White). (p. 60)

*Sense of belonging:* “students’ perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the group (e.g., campus community) or others on campus (e. g., faculty, peers” (Strayhorn, 2012, p. 17).

### **Limitations and Delimitations**

The study has some limitations. First, I have a personal investment in the research topic. My daughter could (when she is old enough) identify as AfroLatina – her father is of Haitian descent and I am Mexican. Thus, the research topic carries a sentimental value. I am aware objectivity is essential in data analysis and interpretation, and as such, I refrained from interjecting personal bias. In order to mitigate this, I took notes and journaled after each interview (Patton, 2002). While the topic is very personal to me, it could also contribute to the richness of the analysis given my personal insight of the phenomenon. Second, the intersectionality of my identities (i. e., immigrant, woman, first-generation student, Latina, etc.) provided personal insight into the racialization of Latina/os, colorism, dominance of cultural beliefs and traditions, and being a student of color on a college campus. This “insider knowledge” provided valuable information that

was utilized to inform the development of the interview questions and establishment of rapport with participants.

The third limitation was geographic region. Throughout the longevity of the study, I lived in the Southwestern United States but the study was conducted in the Northeast. Nonetheless, I gained support from administrators at the University System level, they in turn, appointed a campus champion to aid in the coordination of the study. I relied on college administrators to aid in the recruitment of participants (through the dissemination of recruitment emails, posting fliers, and announcing the study in the college newsletter), room reservations, and other study details. Therefore, the success of the study and recruitment of students was largely due to the support and assistance provided to me by on-campus staff. In summary, despite the aforementioned limitations I found ways to mitigate them and successfully conducted the study. In order to assure validity, I remained a natural observer and adhered to strict methodological protocols when gathering, coding, and interpreting data.

Delimitations. I understand that the study of social and personal identities is complex and one study is only the beginning. At the same time, the oversight of researchers in considering Latina/os as a homogenous group has thrust many ethnic subgroups into invisibly. The experiences of AfroLatina/o college students have gone unstudied and warrant consideration. Although some may argue their experiences have been captured within the multiracial, biracial, and mixed-race category, the reality is they do not adequately fit within such categorizations. AfroLatina/os can be both culturally Latina/os and Black. In addition, their family histories, customs, traditions, and language

are a rich mixture of the two – but their physical appearance could superimpose an identity they do not acknowledge. Thus, to include AfroLatina/os within the Latina/o and/or multiracial/biracial/mixed-race category would push them to invisibility. Consequently, research related to multiracial, biracial, and mixed-race students is not considered in this study since it does not pertain to the population of interest. Chapter 2 further explains this argument.

In this study I sought to understand how AfroLatina/o undergraduate students negotiate in-group acceptance and identify if that impacts their academic persistence. Moreover, it explores the dynamic nature of identity development by attempting to grasp the process AfroLatina/os undergo in molding their racial and ethnic identity. Since the population of interest is small and located in clusters around the United States, the selected data collection site was a college campus located in a large urban setting. Schomburg College (pseudonym) was selected in order to recruit an adequate number of AfroLatina/o participants – since it is located in “the” AfroLatina/o nucleus of the United States. By selecting a college that is located in a large urban setting, the findings may not be applicable to AfroLatina/os living in rural areas or in a different region of the country, but findings could provide insight into some shared social experiences.

### **Significance of the Study**

The study contributes to the scholarship of Latina/os in higher education and validates the group’s diversity. It contributes a new way of approaching the research of Latina/os in higher education and challenges the homogenous approach researchers have habitually adopted. Moreover, through this study I seek to challenge the racialization of

Latina/os and refute the over-generalized approach of retention strategies implemented for SOC in higher education. AfroLatina/os could encounter unique challenges in their identity development process and search for cultural acceptance. Yet, the lack of scholarship on this topic only allows us to generalize. I hope the study findings will inform student services as well as higher education institutions as a whole. Most importantly, I sincerely hope this study will help AfroLatina/os emerge from the periphery – leading researchers to recognize their experiences as worthy of being studied. Moreover, I seek to contribute to the narrow AfroLatina/o student literature in higher education by offering a glimpse into their personal and lived experiences on campus.

Ultimately, the study has the potential to inform the literature of race relations in the United States, college persistence literature, and AfroLatina/o identity development and in-group sense of belonging. I acknowledge identity development is complex and multifaceted, and I do not intend to present the study findings as representative of all AfroLatina/o college students' experiences. One study cannot capture such complexity but it can serve as a foundation for future research. In addition, the topic is timely given the recent racial climate in the United States and the persistent division between Blacks and Latina/os. The Public Broadcasting System recently aired a story highlighting the number of hate crimes has remained flat over the past decade, yet, Blacks are twice as likely as any other group to experience a hate crime – ten times more than Whites (Sreenivasan, 2015). The story relied on Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) data, which collected “Hispanic” data separate from Blacks. Other horrific racial injustice incidents like the murders of Michael Brown, Eric Garner, and the Ferguson unrest have

aided in the hyper-condensation of Blackness to be synonymous to African Americans – at least in the United States. AfroLatina/os are left at the margins of Blackness and although they may withstand similar struggles to their African American peers, they are often overlooked by both groups. Social issues carry over to college campuses and it is critical we move beyond the homogenous approach to Latina/os. Overall, this study has the potential to expand the definition of Blackness and Latinidad within the United States context and to foster an inclusive climate for AfroLatina/os on college campuses.

### **Chapter Summary**

This chapter introduced the study and its focus on AfroLatina/o student ethnic and racial identity development, in-group sense of belonging, and academic persistence. It began with a statement of the problem and provided justification for the need for this study. The umbrella term of Latina/o has overlooked the unique experiences of AfroLatina/os. The first research question attempts to understand the process AfroLatina/os undergo in molding their racial, ethnic, and cultural identities. The second and third questions relate to their experiences on campus, specifically, how they negotiate in-group sense of belonging and identify what factors may impact their academic persistence. Research questions, significance of the study, methodology, limitations, delimitations, and definition of key terms were also provided. The ensuing chapter provides a literature review on the social construction of race, perceptions of race in Latin America, skin tone bias, U. S. racial categorizations, an overview of social psychology models, and student sense of belonging and persistence literature.

## **Chapter 2: Review of the Literature**

This chapter begins with a general introduction about AfroLatina/os and the need to understand their experiences on campus. The chapter reviews the extant literature on AfroLatin/as in the United States, offers a critical review of the scholarship on the social construction of race, race in Latin America and the United States, racial categorizations by the U.S. Census, and an overview of social psychology models, sense of belonging and persistence literature in higher education. Thus, to better understand how cultural, societal, and political forces affect AfroLatina/o student experiences, a particular emphasis was placed on the historic and systematic use of race in the United States and academic research. Moreover, in order to understand the experiences of AfroLatina/o students on U.S. college campuses, one must first understand the implications of being AfroLatina/o in the United States, and second the role race and ethnicity has played in the educational experiences of SOC (Menchaca, 1997).

A bulk of this chapter is comprised by an overview of the social construction of race and the social investment in the fabrication of racial differences, which has inadvertently led to the isolation of the darkest members of society within any group. AfroLatina/os not only have a panethnic identity but they also experience panethnic discrimination – meaning they experience discrimination in their country of origin as well as in the U. S. – largely due to the color of their skin. In order to discern the implications of panethnic discrimination, an overview of race and race relations in Latin America is essential. Regardless of generational status in the U. S. research indicates Latina/os continue to maintain a very strong cultural affinity to their country of origin (Anzaldúa,

2007; Cruz-Janzen, 2002; Perry, 2008; Rodriguez, 2000; Romo, 2011; Weyland, n.d.; Zamora, 2013). Consequently, AfroLatina/os are forced to mitigate three cultures as well as their ethnic and racial identities. An overview of how race is perceived in Latin America and the U. S. provides great insight into the process AfroLatina/o students undergo when negotiating in-group acceptance.

Although the primary purpose of this study was to understand the experiences of AfroLatina/o college students, they cannot be understood by only considering their campus interactions. Social-cultural factors such as the social construction of race, race relations, contemporary social perceptions of Blacks, and historically rooted discrimination directly impact their academic performance – at the social and/or personal level. In acknowledging that issues of race and social justice in higher education have long-stemmed historical roots, one can better understand the experiences of AfroLatina/o college students.

The history of race in America is replete with political and social condemnations of race, while the immoral fruits of racism are justified and exploited through stratagems ranging from scientific racism to sociobiological to the racially coded language of color blindness. We do not want the burden of our crimes, but we want to innocently enjoy the aftermath of our history, tinged as it is with racial oppression and sluggish reform. (Sundstrom, 2008, p. 2)

As noted, racism is often overlooked and justified as a thing of the past. However, those being affected by racism on a daily basis understand it is still a robust force in society. AfroLatina/o student experiences must be accessed through the incorporation of the aforementioned. Only then will their experiences of being a double-minority student be understood as an extension of their everyday dealings in society. This chapter provides



clear examples of how social-cultural and historic factors directly impact AfroLatina/o student's identity development, in-group sense of belonging, and academic persistence. Finally, the chapter ends with a brief overview of the two theoretical frameworks utilized in this study.

### **AfroLatina/o Students**

In-group Latina/o prejudice has existed for generations and is fueled by historical systems of privilege and oppression (Santiago, 1991). In the United States, the combination of historic racial discrimination and Latina/os prejudice against Blacks has pushed AfroLatina/os to reject any connection to African Americans (Morrison, 1993; Pryce, 1999; Santiago, 1991). At the same time, “. . . African Americans do not generally welcome [AfroLatina/os] as their own and accuse them of wanting to disclaim their true heritage and bettering themselves by claiming to be Latina/os and speaking Spanish” (Cruz-Janzen, 2002, p. 58). Lighter skinned Latina/os deny AfroLatina/os in-group membership due to their dark skin and prominent African features (Cruz-Janzen, 2001, 2002). This lack of in-group acceptance could affect the college experience of AfroLatina/o students. Deterministic views of Blackness in effect cast AfroLatina/os as outsiders – since they are not seen as being “Black enough.” However, scholarship on this topic is scant. Little is known about AfroLatina/o college student's in-group acceptance (or rejection) and its impact on their academic persistence. Research indicates college student's sense of belonging is imperative to their academic success – and the absence of belonging often leads to decreased engagement and interest (Strayhorn, 2012).

Thus, understanding how AfroLatina/os negotiate in-group acceptance is a critical component of the persistence puzzle.

Students' on-campus sense of belonging is informed by peer groups and campus community but also by the individuals' level of identity development (Strayhorn, 2012). In effect, several stage identity development theories (see for example, Astin, 1984; Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Perry, 1968) attempt to explain the college student identity development process but they are based on a monoracial perspective of race. The early 1990s gave rise to biracial identity models but the prominent models (see for example, Poston, 1990; Root, 1990) did not account for the double-rejection AfroLatina/os encounter. Latina/o specific models (see for example Arce, 1981; Bernardo M. Ferdman & Gallegos, 2001) do acknowledge the heterogeneity of Latina/os but are unable to integrate their multiplicity. Notably, developing a model that adequately captures the complexity of AfroLatina/o identity development has proven to be a difficult feat to achieve.

AfroLatina/os are members of the two largest minority groups (Black and Latino) in the United States, which makes it very difficult to account for their numeric presence – there is no established systemic way to gather this data. In 2000, AfroLatina/os accounted for five percent of those who reported multiple races and increased to seven percent in 2010 (Census Black Population Brief, 2011). Although Census data is the most accurate indicator of population demographics, Latino/s overwhelmingly check the “other” box or write-in their nation of origin (Bennett, 2000), making it difficult to accurately count the number of AfroLatina/os in the United States. Nonetheless, the Pew Research Center has

identified the need to acknowledge the heterogeneity of Latina/os, and for the first time in U. S. history, developed a national survey asking U. S. Latina/os if they identified as AfroLatina/os. Not surprisingly, nearly a quarter (24%) of respondents self-identified as such, while 18 percent identifying as Black, and 39 percent as White (Gonzalez-Barrera, 2015). As the Latina/o population continues to grow so will the number of AfroLatina/os. It is imperative their experiences be recognized as unique and they be the topic of serious research.

The sense of belonging and persistence literature is extensive, yet AfroLatina/o college students are overlooked in mainstream research. For example, Braxton, Hirschy, and McClendon (2011) were contracted to edit a book on persistence for the ASHE/ERIC series. Although the authors identified the problem of student departure and the need to address the issue they, however, failed to include SOC in the extensive analysis. While there are a number of researchers who exclusively study the experiences of SOC in higher education, their work is seen as “in addition to” the mainstream research. That is, in order for SOC research to have a lasting impact, it must be considered as a priority and placed front and center in higher education research.

In summary, despite the enormity of persistence literature in higher education, much of the research gives marginal emphasis to SOC and completely neglects Latina/o heterogeneity – which by extension leads to an oversight of AfroLatina/o students. Of the few studies that focus on SOC persistence, all neglect the experiences of AfroLatina/o students. I conducted consistent EBSCO searches since May 2014 utilizing various combinations of the following words: “AfroLatino,” “Afro Latinos,” “Afronegros,”

“Afrohispanic” “Afrodescendents” “College,” “University,” and “Higher Education,” every search turned up zero results. Googlescholar searches did yield results but they were not directly linked to American higher education. More specifically, the majority of literature is from Latin American and/or cultural studies, anthropology, and sociology. Thus, not only is this study needed but it also makes a unique contribution to the scant literature of AfroLatina/o students in higher education.

### **Social Construction of Race**

There exists a plethora of scholarship on the social construction of race. This section provides a nuanced overview of the topic given the importance race plays in the lives of AfroLatina/os. More specifically, this section underlines how the social construction of race inappropriately upholds a Black-White binary that systematically ignores all other non-Black people of color, including AfroLatina/os. In addition, although Latina/os are a heterogeneous group there is an obvious rejection of Blackness in favor of Whiteness, rendering AfroLatina/os as outsiders in both the Black and Latina/o community. The section below elaborates further.

Race is imposed upon people based on the amalgamation of physical appearance and the social construction of race within that particular society. Identity on the other hand, is the conscious decision to self-identify through the adoption, modification, and/or rejection of a set of beliefs, traditions, customs, and understandings unique to a particular group (Bennett, 2000; Cruz-Janzen, 2002; Haney López, 1994; Jones & McEwen, 2000; Romo, 2011). According to Williams and Thornton (1998) “there are two significant contributors to ethnicity or racial group identity: a thread of historical experience that is

shared by each member of the collectivity, and a sense of potency/strength inherent in the group” (p. 255). In the United States where racism is a critical component of the national psyche and collective history, the racial classification of groups exist with little flexibility for differentiation.

When President Obama was elected in 2008, newspaper headlines acknowledged him as the first Black president in U. S. history, completely neglecting his biracial identity. Yet, his categorization as Black was not surprising given the historical one-drop rule.

Used only in the United States and applied only to those with black ancestry, the rule classified black-white Americans (or anyone with any ‘drop’ of black ancestry, for that matter) exclusively as black... biracial wasn’t an option, nor was white. (Khanna, 2011, p. 3)

The dominant monoracial discourse in the United States, coupled with public policies and practices that uphold a monoracial system, make it very difficult for biracial/multiracial individuals to develop a strong sense of racial and ethnic identity. This is complicated further for AfroLatina/os who are members of a dual-minority group (i. e., Black and Latino). They are forced to search for a cohesive identity and group acceptance beyond that allowed by the United States’ Black-White race binary.

The binary has systematically pushed non-Blacks out of the race conversation by establishing race to be synonymous with Black – and Black to be synonymous with African American. Even AfroLatina/os do not adequately fit within the prescribed Black category due to their Latina/o identity (Romo, 2011). This binary ignores the rapidly growing racial and ethnic diversity of the United States and disregards the heterogeneity

of the Latina/o population. “Hispanic” as an ethnic label has been imposed upon a people that are diverse in racial identity and national origin (Stokes-Brown, 2012). “Latinos do not fit easily into the prevailing systems of racial categories in the United States” (Bernado M. Ferdman & Gallegos, 2001) and because most Latina/os select “other” on racial classification questions, it is evident the current racial classificatory schemes are inadequate (Landale & Oropesa, 2002). This inaccuracy combined with the dominance of the Black-White binary has in essence established AfroLatina/os as invisible, despite their Black ancestry.

The ethnic categorization of Latina/os is complicated further since most reject U. S. race and ethnic categories. In fact, most Latina/os primarily self-identify with their nation of origin and not racial/ethnic classifications (Jones-Correa & Leal, 1996; Landale & Oropesa, 2002). Nonetheless, discrimination based on skin color is still problematic in the Latina/o community. Many AfroLatina/os endure exclusion by other Latina/os due to their darker skin tone gradients (Cruz-Janzen, 2001; Romo, 2011). Consequently, despite Latina/os not ascribing to U. S. racial categories, there is a deliberate social investment in Whiteness through the rejection of Blackness. Accordingly, the nexus between the social construction of race and prejudice may have inadvertently isolated AfroLatina/os within the Latina/o ethnic category (see for example, Cruz-Janzen, 1998, 2002; Norwood & Foreman, 2014; Romo, 2011; Villarreal, 2010; Walker, 1983). “AfroLatina/os [experience] a pull in two directions at once – that of the nationality or Latina/o panethnicity, and that of Blackness and the realities of U. S. African American life” (Flores & Jiménez Román, 2009, p. 326). They are forced to choose a single identity:

Black or Brown, between Latina/o and American, and between their race and ethnicity. When asked to report their racial identify on the U. S. Census “a significant number of Hispanics do not choose a standard census race category... about four-in-ten select the ‘some other race’ category... two-thirds of U. S. Hispanic adults consider being Hispanic as part of their racial background” (Gonzalez-Barrera, 2015). However, the literature is scant on how AfroLatina/os experience race in the U. S., and almost nonexistent on AfroLatino/a college student experiences.

The stereotypic image of Latina/os is of people with olive skin tones, dark brown flowing hair, and brown eyes. Consequently, AfroLatina/os are marginalized due to their prominent African features and their assumed proximity to African Americans. Latina/os with more prominent African bloodlines are more likely to experience discrimination, and stratification at the bottom of the political, social, economic, and educational levels of society (Cruz-Janzen, 2002; Villarreal, 2010). In addition, the U. S. fascination with binaries (i. e., Black/White, foreign/American, good/bad) can work to deny the existence of AfroLatina/os as a legitimate identity. Finally, the amalgamation of the stated factors directly impacts the experiences of AfroLatina/o college students and their identity development. In order to understand how race and ethnicity impacts their experiences in the U. S., a general overview of how race is perceived in Latin America is required, especially because Latina/os maintain a strong cultural affinity to their nation of origin.

### **Race in Latin America**

The notion of classifying people based on skin color is not new. In fact, it has been used throughout history by many cultures and political entities. Yet, these

classificatory systems are different and the hierarchies vary by the social-cultural-political circumstances within each country. For example, in Latin America during the postcolonial period those in power accepted without a question the notion that Whites were superior to others. Since they could not deny the rich racial mixture between the Indigenous, Europeans, and Africans (comprising the modern day *mestiza/o*), Whites established a tactic to move towards what they considered superiority through the *blanqueamiento* (Whitening) of its people (Norwood & Foreman, 2014). This meant the actual process of “breeding out” any non-White lineage, specifically African. Like the social construction of race, this body of literature is colossal but a surface level overview of *blanqueamiento* is imperative to understanding how AfroLatina/os are forced to negotiate in-group acceptance – a process that is complicated further due to their obvious African ancestry.

Unlike in the United States, Latin America has upheld a racial classificatory system that could be traversed only through increased social class. This practice dates back to colonial times. For example, the Spanish colonists kept meticulous Census records and *blanqueamiento* through social class is easily identified by those documents. According to Colonial Spain Census records, Los Angeles was colonized in 1781 and the total population consisted of forty-six people, twenty-six of whom were African or part African, however, by 1790 the same individuals were reclassified (Forbes, 2010).

The racial classifications were all away from Indian or mulatto and towards *Español*– that is, everyone acquired some fictitious Caucasian ancestry and shed Negro backgrounds– becoming, in effect, lighter as they move up the social scales. (p. 30)



Thus, racial categorizations were fluid and largely based on social status rather than phenotype, indicating a clear fluidity of racial lines and the ability to successfully traverse them – but only through the acquisition of financial capital. Nonetheless, such practices methodically erase AfroLatina/os from U. S. and Latina/o history. *Blanqueamiento* in effect has contributed to the filtered history of the United States and the rejection of *AfroLatinidad*.

### **African Roots**

Many people in the United States are ignorant to the fact that Latin America is home to millions of African descendants. Yet, African presence in Latin America and the Caribbean extends back to the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade. “Between 1502 and 1866, 11.2 million Africans survived the dreadful Middle Passage and landed as slaves in the New World... only 450,000 arrived in the United States” (Louis Gates, Jr., 2011, p. 2) the rest were taken to Latin America and the Caribbean. Overall, it is estimate between 1440 – 1870, about 35.4% of enslaved Africans were taken to Brazil, about 58.5% to the rest of Latin America and West Indies, and only 4.4% to the United States (Thomas, 1997). Clearly, African ancestry is deeply rooted in Latin American countries directly influencing culture, customs, traditions, and the genetic makeup of its inhabitants but it does not translate into an acknowledgment of such. The colonization of the Americas was more than the appropriation of land, annihilation of Indigenous peoples, and economic exploitation but it also transcended into contemporary standards of beauty, *Latinidad*, and the rejection of Blackness.

The colonizers were not noblemen or lords but were driven by their desire to establish themselves within the highest levels of society. Thus, when they arrived to the Americas they “sought the privileges and statues of the *hidalgos* and recreated the semifeudal hierarchical arrangements of the society they had left behind” (Oboler, 1997, p. 33). They were brutal and ruthless with the Indigenous people who inhabited the land – they enslaved them but many died due to disease. Consequently, they turned to the Trans-Atlantic Slave trade for sources of labor. The robust tobacco, coffee, and sugar industries were the driving force behind the importation of enslaved Africans and their population quickly surpassed that of colonizer. Initially, there were strict antimiscegenation standards to uphold but none were written into law until much later.

Colonial master-slave relations were superimposed on a racial order that became increasingly diversified through both miscegenation and the introduction of the African slave trade. Thus, exploitation of both the indigenous populations and the enslaved Africans was not limited solely to their labor, for the presence of both these groups also served to reinforce the class and racial status they and their offspring afforded the New World’s Spanish rulers. (Oboler, p. 33)

A *castas* system was established on the basis of skin tone gradients and was used to assess the degree of *sangre buena* (good blood) an individual possessed. It resulted in a number of racial categorizations “ranging as few as 12 in the Dominican Republic and 16 in Mexico to 134 in Brazil, making our use of octoroon and quadroon and mulatto pale by comparison” (Louis Gates, Jr. 2011, p.10). Latin America adopted a different stance of miscegenation than the United States. While at first they opposed miscegenation, they later encouraged racial mixing between lighter skinned *mestizos* and colonizers in order to move closer to whiteness (Oboler). It also reinforced colonizers desires to establish

themselves at the highest levels of society since they were the only ones with *sangre pura*.

The desire was always to move closer to Whiteness and to breed out any *sangre mala* (bad blood). Many countries “sponsored official immigration policies of ‘whitening,’ aiming to dilute the number of its citizens who were black or darker shades of brown by encouraging Europeans to migrate there” (Louis Gates, Jr. 2011, p. 10). National ideologists throughout Latin America worked diligently in order to exclude Blackness from the national psyche and collective history. However, when Latin American countries had gained independence from their colonizers, restructuring needed to happen and *mestizaje* was utilized as the common denominator – it fostered a unification force corralled around a singular national identity.

Blacks and especially indians were romanticized as part of a more or less glorious past, but the future held for them paternalistic guidance towards integration, which also ideally meant more race mixture and perhaps the eventual erasure of blackness and indianess from the nation. The mestizo was idealized as of bi-ethnic or tri-ethnic origin, but the image held up was always the lighter end of the mestizo spectrum... resulting in the coexistence of two variants on the nationalist theme: on the one hand, the democratic, inclusive ideology of *todos somos mestizos*—everyone is mestizo, and herein lies the particularity of Latin American identity; on the other hand, the discriminatory ideology that points out that some are lighter mestizos than others, prefers the whiter to the darker, and sees the consolidation of nationality in a process of whitening. (Wade, 1995, p. 11)

Despite high degrees of racial mixing and the prominence of an African and Ingenious past, *mestizaje* perpetrated the notion of a new type of people, effectively casting the prior to perpetual invisibility. The colonial past of the Americas established a racial and class order that extends into modern day society and is quite different than those observed in the United States.

Countries like the Dominican Republic, which have very rich Black histories, deny their Blackness and adopt *mestizaje* as their emblem. The very first rebellion of Blacks took place in the Dominican Republic in 1522 and rather than acknowledging it as a source of pride, it is overlooked and ignored. Despite over 90% of its inhabitants possessing some degree of African lineage they do not identify as such (Louis Gates, Jr. 2011).

Few people self-identify as black or *negro*; rather, a wide majority of Dominicans – 82 percent most recently in federal census – designate their race as ‘Indio,’ while only 4.13 percent designate themselves as ‘black’... Dominicans don’t think of themselves as black. They call themselves ‘Indio’ instead, in a reference to the color of their skin, echoing a myth of the extent of their genetic descent from the islands indigenous inhabitations. (Louis Gates, Jr., p. 120)

In essence it is the social construction of race and the subconscious, or deliberate, rejection of the darker skinned lineage that overlooks AfroLatina/os. The colonial history of these countries directly impact contemporary notions of who is deemed Latina/o and who is seen as lesser. Thus, in order to understand AfroLatina/os in the United States, we must first understand the systemic *blancamiento* in Latin America and the Caribbean and how it transcends geographic boundaries into U. S. society.

### **African Ancestry Denied**

The first African settlers arrived to the Americas in the 1520s through central Mexico and the Carolinas. “Africans who served in Central Mexico and became the ancestors of an extensive Afro-American progeny now estimated to compose about 10 percent of the genetic heritage of the modern day Mexican population” (Forbes, 2010, p. 28). Yet, AfroLatina/os have been effectively erased from the national *mestiza/o* identity,

resulting in an anti-Black sentiment throughout Mexico. Mexicans “with darker skin tone have significantly lower levels of educational attainment and occupational status, and they are more likely to live in poverty and less likely to be affluent, even after controlling for other individual characteristics” (Villarreal, 2010, p. 652). The social categorizations of *mestiza/o* and Indigenous in Mexico are extremely fluid. It is not based solely on skin color nor ancestry but also language spoken, cultural traits, and community of residence (Villarreal). *Mestiza/o* has been the national identity of Mexico since the Mexican Revolution of 1910, the term ignores the role of African ancestry in Mexico, nonetheless, for the first time in Mexico’s national history the 1.38 million AfroMexicans are being recognized in the national census (Barksdale, 2015). Mexico was only one of two Latin American countries, the other being Chile, who did not officially recognize their Afrodescendants. It is indeed a step towards recognition but there lies a long path towards equity in other sectors of society. The investment in Whiteness, nonetheless, will continue to pose large social barriers for the darkest members of society.

Although the definition of *blanqueamiento* has evolved over time, it is strictly bound to Whiteness as the desired race and is tactfully interwoven to social class mobility. That is, money effectively Whitens but skin color severely restricts access to resources that would make social mobility possible for people with dark skin.

*Blanqueamiento* is not unique to Mexico, the disparate treatment still continues to this day throughout Latin America. Those who are lighter skinned are afforded more opportunities, including more opportunities for education and social economic mobility, as well as representation at the highest levels of government. In the United States this

phenomenon is known as colorism. “Variations between skin tone gradients have been noted as a criterion of within-group differentiation and stratification among people of color, black Americans in particular” (Harvey, Banks, & Tennial, 2014, p. 198).

Although it is not termed as such, colorism is evident in Latin American countries through blatant racial segregation in nearly all sectors of society as well as within the home (Cruz-Janzen, 2002; Villarreal, 2010; Wade, 2005). Thus, colorism is the driving force behind access to resources and social mobility. In effect, colorism is so pervasive in Latin American countries that its prevalence is overlooked even in countries like Brazil that has a substantial Black population.

Brazil is home to the largest Black population outside of Africa, consequently, there is a large body of literature on how race is lived in Brazil. There are at least 300 terms to define skin color in Brazil (Norwood & Foreman, 2014) where “appearance, gender, status, and social situation play a role in determining who is classified as black, mulatto, or White” (Norwood & Foreman, p. 10). Telles and Lim (1998) conducted a study on income inequality and race in Brazil. The researchers recruited participants to serve as both interviewees and interviewers. All participants were asked to self-report their race but also asked interviewers to designate a race to their interviewees. They discovered support for the “money Whitens” argument when “interviewers whiten[ed] those with higher [economic] status and darkened those of lower status” (p. 473). In addition, Blacks of higher economic status were more likely to self-identify as brown, indicating the prevalence of *blanqueamiento*.

One of the largest differences between people of color in the United States and those in Brazil is that in Brazil, mixed race (with Black) are not seen as Black, whereas in the United States a “mulatto” is automatically rendered Black and treated as such (Telles & Lim, 1998). Consequently, “the status of mulatto in Brazil reflects a national belief in whitening, whereas whiteness is desirable and blackness is to be escaped” (Telles & Lim, p. 466). The one-drop rule (where one drop of Black blood legally classified a person as Black) that endured in the American South is the complete opposite in Latin America: one drop of White blood begins the road to Whiteness or *blanqueamiento* (Norwood & Foreman, 2014). Spanish colonies in the “New World” shared a similar perspective:

Generally speaking, each person’s caste is decided by the quality of the blood, which shows itself, too plainly to be concealed, at first sight. Yet, the least drop of Spanish blood, if it be only of quadroon or octoroon, is sufficient to raise them from the ranks of slaves and entitles them to a suit of clothes, boots, hats, cloaks, spurs, long knife, all complete, and course and dirty as may be and to call themselves Españoles and to hold property, if they can get any. (Forbes, 2010, p. 33)

The Spanish view of miscegenation differed from that of Europeans. After the U. S. appropriated areas ruled by the Spanish, “violent racist attitudes were introduced into the region and the Spanish-speaking Californians [and most others], quite naturally, disassociated themselves from their hybrid past” (Forbes, p. 35). This particular difference between the two cultures resulted in the contemporary notions of racial hierarchy as they persist in modern day U. S., Latina/os in the United States conspicuously draw from notions of *blanqueamiento*, *mestizaje*, and social class in order to designate worthiness of being considered Latina/o.

## Whiteness as Desired

While some argue the existence of *blanqueamiento* in Latin America indicates the absence of racial discrimination, it still upholds a system where Whiteness is desired. In addition, “if upwardly mobile Blacks marry lighter-skinned people, blackness is inevitably bleached out of the middle strata of society, maintaining the overall correlation between Black and poor” (Wade, 1995, p. 297). Nonetheless, at the root of *blaqueamiento* lies the specter racism, because it requires an individual to reject Blackness and embrace the ideal of Whiteness. While the notions of race and racism in the United States take different forms, they are deeply rooted in the delicate fabric of society. In comparing the U. S. racial system to that of Latin America, Wade (1995) writes, “It is an open question whether a society that sees every addition of White blood as a step towards purification is more, or less, prejudiced than a society that sees any appreciable trace of Negro blood as a mark of degradation” (p. 295). Nonetheless, in order to understand the experiences of AfroLatina/os in the U. S., one must understand how Latin American countries view and categorize race. Since U. S. Latina/os overwhelmingly identify with their national origin rather than U. S. culture, their views of race dictate who is considered Latina/o and who threatens the process of *blanqueamiento* – ultimately determining who is extended in-group acceptance and who is effectively denied access.

The Latina/o social investment in race is multidimensional but “studying how systems of racial categorization and stratification in Latin American countries differ from the [U. S.] can broaden our understanding of how race is socially constructed and how



racial differences in socioeconomic status are reproduced” (Villarreal, 2010, p. 652). A variety of factors inform Latina/o identity development within the United States, “including cultural, historical, sociological, political, and others – both contribute to this diversity and point to the development and existence in the United States of an overarching Latin[a/o] identity” (Ferdman & Gallegos, 2001, p. 34). When these factors are coupled with Latin American notions of *blaqueamiento* and race relations within the United States, AfroLatina/os are thrust into a tug – of – war between self-identification and imposition of racial identity. AfroLatina/o college students bring with them their double-minority status as well as notions of invisibility – both of which could negatively impact sense of belonging – and by extension their persistence.

### **Skin Tone Bias**

During the colonial period, the pyramid of power was largely based on the dichotomy of slave versus free person. For English settlers of Virginia their largest base of labor was provided by indentured servants, at least initially (Finkelman, 2014). While they did exploit Native Americans, they did not enslave them, “in part because the English had no experience with slavery and the very idea of slavery ran counter to English law and custom” (Finkelman, p. 29). In fact, the first Africans were treated as indentured servants but by 1590 the dynamics had changed and a clear “pecking order [had been established] with White English Christians at the top and heathens (Blacks and Native Americans) at the bottom” (p. 30). By the 1660s, being Black became a marker of slavery, and whiteness became an indicator of freedom, or at the very least, indentured servitude that led to freedom.

## **Racism Endemic**

Black scholars like W. E. B. Du Bois openly criticized the endemically racist system in the United States:

The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line, the question as to how far differences of race – which show themselves chiefly in the color of the skin and the texture of the hair – will hereafter be made the basis of denying to over half the world the right of sharing to utmost ability the opportunities and privileges of modern civilization. (Walters, 1917, p. 58)

Du Bois argued that race and racism were endemic despite emancipation. He subtly challenged the notion of racial differences by arguing the only difference between the races was in fact phenotype, not genetics. Norwood and Foreman (2014) note “there is no such thing as biologically different races; that the genetic markers between two Black people, for example, could be greater than the difference between a Black and White person; and that race, rather, is more a social construction as opposed to a biological one” (p. 18). Nonetheless, the color-line reserved the best jobs and opportunities for the social and economic advancement of Whites, and upheld policies that left all others at the bottom of the hierarchy. Unfortunately, “the problem of the twentieth century” is also the problem of the 21st century.

Much of the social, political, and economic disparities that exist currently are a consequence of historic discrimination against non-Whites. However, Whites are not the only ones who discriminate against non-Whites. In-group discrimination occurs and is often based on a skin color gradient. Walker (1983) elaborated Du Bois’ statement of the problem of the 20th century and introduced the notion of colorism, “I would say that the problem of the color-line, is not only ‘of the relations of the darker races of men [sic] in

Asia and Africa...’ but of the relations between the darker and the lighter people of the same race” (p. 59). She continued, “It is our ‘familial’ relations with each other in America that we need to scrutinize. And it is the whole family, rather than the dark or the light, that must be affirmed” (p. 59). In effect, non-Whites are also responsible for the perpetuation of a discriminatory system that targets dark skinned people. Even though racial categories are merely social constructions, they have been used throughout history to separate, conquer, and dominate entire peoples (Norwood, 2013).

Obscurely enough, people of color have bought into the notion of their own inferiority and in turn discriminate against each other. Colorism operates in the same manner in the United States as it does in Latin America. Yet, there is no word in Latin America that correctly captures the essence of colorism. Still, it permeated every sector of society and targets the darkest members of the group. It is often disregarded and overshadowed by the monoracial and monoethnic discourse. In order to move beyond the monoracial discourse in the United States, an honest conversation about the social construction of race and how communities of color directly uphold racist norms must be addressed. *Blaqueamiento* in Latin American and colorism in the United States, both embrace Whiteness and condemn Blackness. Accordingly, people of color have internalized racist notions and act upon them without the consciousness that they are reinforcing a system built around the rejection of non-Whites. Therefore, despite generations of U. S. born Latina/os, the conjunction of national origin affinity and views of race in the U. S., continue to perpetrate panethnic colorist notions that reinforce the

pervasive rejection of African ancestry, and by default deny AfroLatina/os in-group membership.

The experiences of AfroLatina/o students is largely informed by the historic treatment of Blacks in the U. S. and the investment of *blanqueamiento* in the Latina/o community. As such, the study of AfroLatina/o students needs to happen external to Latina/o college students. Their identity development takes on a different path and meaning, their rejection from both groups could potentially lead them to self-identity as neither. Nonetheless, more studies need to be conducted on the process AfroLatina/os undergo in molding their racial, ethnic, and cultural identity within the United States.

### **The United States Census**

The antimiscegenation movement was so pervasive that race scholars such as Nott (1843, 1844, 1854), Gliddon (1857, 1854), Hoffman (1896), Shaler (1904), Hunt (1869), and LeConte (1880, 1892, 1879), who conducted “scientific” research in order to “prove the inferiority of the Black race,” were publishing in some of the most prestigious scientific journals of their time. Their biased research would not only influence contemporary issues but also the development of the U. S. Census. The first Census was administered in 1790 and the enumeration category only included free Whites, all other free persons, and slaves – designating slave as a category of people and ignoring all other non-Whites. The word mulatto appeared for the first time in the 1850 Census due in part to the antimiscegenation movement. The 1870 Census included two additional categories, Chinese and Indian. However, the 1890 Census included White, Black, mulatto, quadroon, octoroon, Chinese, Japanese, and Indian categories (IPUMS, n.d.).

There was no scientific method behind the creation of categories other than the individual motives of those designing the Census. The 1900 Census made a number of changes: (1) the word “race” was used for the first time alongside “color,” (2) mulatto was removed but “negros or those of negro descent” were clumped into the Black category, and (3) the option to write-in a racial identification was included (IPUMS, n.d.). The 1910 Census allowed for people to write-in their “race/color” and also included an “Other” option. Evidently, the Census has continued to change and evolve since the first time it was administered. Nonetheless, the only category that has remained unchanged over time is that of White – meritoriously normalizing the “otherness” of non-Whites. Most importantly, the categories were informed by racist beliefs about the inferiority of non-Whites but are still utilized as if they were scientifically sound.

Recognizing the historical foundation of Census categories is important because educational institutions utilize the same race and ethnic categories as the Federal Government. Yet, the established categories fail to effectively capture population demographics. Some Latina/os feel the Census fails to adequately capture the diversity of the Latina/o community and attest Census figures do not appropriately reflect population size (Haney López, 1994; Hernandez, 2012; Poe, n. d.; Reyes, 2014), sparking debate among community leaders and scholars on how demographic data should be collected (Reyes, 2014). In the case of AfroLatina/os, their identity is so complex that Census categories force them to choose one identity over another. Public colleges and universities are forced to only report the ethnic identity but not the race of the student. For example, if a student identifies as ethnically Hispanic but racially Black, the student

would only be categorized as Hispanic – ignoring their race self-identification. Such practices make it very difficult for AfroLatina/os to be included in student demographic reports – yet again forcing them into invisibility.

### **Racial Categorizations**

During the 1960s, racial tensions in the U. S. boiled over and people of color took to the streets demanding social change (Delgado, 2001). In 1961, President John F. Kennedy issued Executive Order 10925, mandating projects receiving federal funding employ “affirmative action” in their hiring and employment practices, “with the stated objective of ensuring and promoting ‘equal opportunity’ for all qualified persons without regard to race, creed, color, or national origin” (Birnbaum, 1962, p. 17). That marked the first comprehensive attempt by the Federal Government of nondiscrimination and equitable employment practices. Nonetheless, criticism of the policy came fast. Many Whites felt requesting contractors to implement affirmative action in their hiring practices constituted illegal racial discrimination that was prohibited by the Civil Rights Act (Burstein, 1994). The attempt at providing equal access to all, inadvertently increased emphasis placed on race and completely neglected any other form of diversity.

Burstein (1994) conducted an analysis of how media outlets reported on affirmative action. He found a cohesive pattern across media types in shifts of language used by opponents.

First, *remedial action* was once the dominant package but by 1984 had lost this initial advantage to *no preferential treatment*. Second, *delicate balance* had a brief flash of prominence at the time of the Bakke decision but faded and virtually disappeared after that. And finally, early opposition to affirmative action was frequently displayed as *underserving advantage*, sometimes with overly racist

symbolism. But more recently displays of *no preferential treatment* strongly favored *reverse discrimination*. (p. 385)

Evidently, affirmative action has been under scrutiny since its inception and higher education is no exception. As noted, *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke* (1978) dramatically affected how affirmative action was interpreted and applied in higher education. The constant backlash on the use of affirmative action in higher education has not subsided.

The most recent case is that of *Fisher v. University of Texas*, where Fisher, a White female, was denied admission under the Top Ten Percent rule. Fisher graduated eighty-second in a high school graduating class of 678 and with a SAT score of 1180, she was one of 16,000 students competing for a mere 1,216 spots (Brodin, 2014). In fact, 168 underrepresented students with higher index numbers than Fisher were also denied admission but she felt being White disadvantaged her in the admissions process.

*Fisher v. University of Texas*, a challenge to the very modest weighing of race in admissions at the University of Texas, is only the most recent vehicle for reigning in efforts towards inclusion. Its begrudging acceptance, at least for the time being, of the concept of affirmative action (but setting an exceedingly high bar for its defense) implicitly accepts the new paradigm of white victimhood, where one's disappointments can be blamed simplistically on affirmative action. (Brodin, p. 245)

Some argue the increased focus on racial equality had many unintended outcomes.

Although Affirmative Action's intent is to uphold equity, SOC on campus are often perceived by their White peers as being Affirmative Action cases walking around campus. That sentiment fosters an uncomfortable campus climate for SOC. Another unintended consequence is the development of comprehensive and standardized ways of

collecting racial and ethnic data that superimposes fictitious designations onto people of color.

The Federal Interagency Committee on Education (FICE) identified there lacked a useful way of classifying and gathering racial and ethnic data at the federal level. Thus, they created Directive No. 15 in 1964. The Directive was tasked with developing “standard classification for recordkeeping, collection, and presentation of data on race and ethnicity in federal program administrative reporting and statistical activities (United States Office of Management and Budget, 1994, p 1). In addition, in June of 1974 an Ad Hoc Committee on Racial and Ethnic Definitions was create and charged with developing terms and definitions for the collection of a broad range of racial and ethnic data by federal agencies (United States Office of Management and Budget, 1995). The proposed categories were tested and implemented on May 12, 1977. The designated categories were: Black, American Indian or Alaskan Native, White, and Asian or Pacific Islander for race and Hispanic was designated an ethnicity (United States Office of Management and Budget, n.d.). These are the current racial and ethnic categories utilized by all federal agencies, including IPEDS. Yet, Latina/os are assessed like a racial group rather than an ethnic category, which has sparked much discontent.

Latina/os are not a homogenous group and cannot easily be identifiable by visible features, language, culture, or by proper names. Even though the “Census Bureau invests government funding at unprecedented levels to boost Latino participation in 2010 [Census], it remains out of sync and outdated when it comes to responsibly collecting data on ethnicity, race, and language for [Latina/os]” (Solórzano & Ahlén, 2009, p. 18).



The same problem arises in higher education. The adoption of monoracial categories has lead to an oversight of student diversity and the racialization of Latina/os. The presence of AfroLatina/o students is not tracked on campus since they are automatically categorized under the “Hispanic” ethnic marker when they self-report belonging to the ethnic group. Thus, their experiences remain understudied and their student needs unknown.

### **Hispanic Ethnicity**

Despite race being a social construction (Delgado, 2001; Haney López, 1994), government agencies continue to gather racial and ethnic data. “Racialized identities in the United States have long connoted homogeneity, easily visible identifying features, and biological heredity, but none of these characteristics apply to Latina/os in the United States, nor even to any other national subset” (Alcoff, 2000, p. 24). Yet, federal standards require public institutions to report only the “Hispanic” identity and not the racial identification students report (United States Office of Management and Budget, 1995), leaving an already vulnerable population further marginalized. Racial categories that are implemented by the Federal Government box people into categories rather than allowing them to self-identify. These categories are forging to many Latina/os in the U. S.

Ferdman and Gallegos (2001) explain:

They also vary in terms of their relationship to U. S. racial constructs. Therefore, some groups are more likely to identify as White, while others more typically see themselves as neither White nor Black, but as comprising a distinct racial category. Both between and within these subgroups, there are variations in gender, nativity, immigration status, generation in the United States, acculturation status, social class education, sexual orientation, and other variables that have an

impact on intergroup relations, both among Latinos/as and between Latinos/as and other groups. (p. 36)

“Hispanic” ethnicity was first introduced in the 1970 Census but its categorization has been controversial since its introduction. Despite the Federal Government’s attempt at gathering the most accurate demographic data, few Latina/os identify as “Hispanic,” partially because there is an assumption that all Latina/os share certain characteristics, experiences, beliefs, and attitudes. Yet, with Latina/os yielding from 21 different countries around the world their categorization under an ethnic label is equally problematic as confusing.

The failure of “Hispanic” as an adopted term by many Latina/os lies “in the fact that those targeted by the term have nothing more in common than their designation as a group by an agency of the U. S. Government” (Jones-Correa & Leal, 1996, p. 216). The current racial categories in the U. S. are different than those in Latin American countries. This difference propels “many Latinos [to] view the question of race as a question of culture, national origin, and socialization rather than simply biological or genetic ancestry or color” (Rodriguez, 2000, p. 7). In fact, most Latina/os understand race to mean nation of origin, nationality, and culture (Amaro & Zambrana, 2000; Bennett, 2000; Rodriguez).

The imposition of an ethnic identity upon a diverse group of people has notably been met with resistance.

The results of recent censuses, as well as the personal experiences of Latinos and non-Latinos, raise the question of what race is in the United States. Latinos’ wide range of physical types, their history, and their more ‘social’ or cultural views of race have historically challenged U.S. racial constructions, and the government has had difficulty categorizing them. (Rodriguez, 2000, p. 27)

Nonetheless, those responsible for counting race and ethnicity are increasingly becoming aware that “the growing number of new and existing minorities – often define their ‘race’ quite differently than they would be defined by others” (Rodriguez, 2000, p. 14).

“Hispanic” as a category is best understood as panethnic and heterogeneous. For Latina/os regardless of how race is understood, it is closely knit to color – where “color is a large issue in the Latino community, and racism, in the sense of a preference for and valuing of Whiteness and denial of African and Indigenous heritage, remains common” (Ferdman & Gallegos, 2001, p. 44). The U. S. Census systematically denies AfroLatina/os membership within the “Hispanic” category through their practice of only recording the “Hispanic” identity, and not their reported race. When AfroLatina/os check the Black box (and not report race and ethnicity), they are no longer counted as Latina/o. It seems regardless of how they identify, the current Census enumeration categories are not appropriately designed to capture the complexity and richness of their identities.

### **AfroLatina/os and “Hispanic”**

Self-identifying as AfroLatina/os in a society that operates through a Black-White racial binary poses many challenges. They find themselves pressured to choose between identifying as only Black or only Latina/o. There is no middle ground and identifying as both situates them in a position where they have to prove their loyalty (Cruz-Janzen, 2002; Flores & Jiménez Román, 2009; Romo, 2008, 2011). Despite the blurring of racial lines and the increase of biracial and multiracial births in the U. S., there is still a strict racial structure (Norwood & Foreman, 2014). Rodriguez (2000) suggests,

[a]lthough the taxonomy of race has changed [in the U. S.], we have seen in historical and legislative documents the evolution of two fundamental and socially constructed polarities that place ‘whites’ at one end and ‘other social races’ at the other...this basic dichotomous structure has prevailed. (p. 17)

The racial taxonomy is complicated further by Latina/o subgroups. Latina/os who identify as Black, Asian, Indigenous, and so forth are forced into the “Hispanic” category without concern for their racial identification. This has caused tensions between those who do not identify as “Hispanic” and the Federal Government. As discussed previously, the Black-White racial binary further marginalizes Latina/os and Latina/o sub-groups.

The term “Afro-Latin@” surfaced as a way to signal racial, cultural, and socioeconomic contradictions within the overly vague idea of Latin@” (Jiméz Román & Flores, 2010, p. 2). The self-identification of AfroLatina/o is also,

...a standing challenge to the African American and English-language monopoly over Blackness in the U. S. context, with obvious implications at a hemispheric level. Throughout the hemisphere, ‘afro’ serves to link struggles and declare community of experiences and interests. Most significantly, the prefix establishes the foundational historical and cultural connection to Africa. (p. 2)

How AfroLatina/os identify is contingent on many factors but an overarching factor is the complex history of Africans and Afro-descendants in the Americas (Jiméz Román & Flores). In many Latin American countries AfroLatina/os have been excluded from the social landscape and pushed into invisibility. In the United States, they find themselves negotiating “distinct cultural systems to accomplish multiracial identities” (Romo, 2011, p. 402) within a highly polarized and radicalized society. Consequently, in order to best understand the experiences of AfroLatina/o students, one must fully understand how race, racism, and prejudice are lived within the AfroLatina/o community.

College campuses are increasingly becoming more diverse, yet there is scant research on AfroLatina/o students. Moreover, the experiences of SOC have often been assessed through a deficit perspective that has negatively impacted the educational experiences of SOC. Valencia (1997) notes:

The role of deficit thinking was very influential in the promotion of school segregation...The forced segregation of African Americans and Mexican American students, for example, was based on deficit views that these children were intellectually inferior, linguistically limited in English, unmotivated, and immoral—all characteristics that would hold back the progress of white students if racial/ethnic mixing in schools was permitted. Suffice it to say, deficit thinking in its manifestation of schooling practices led to inferior schooling, hence such social thought and its subsequent policy recommendations contributed substantially to school failure for many low-SES minority students. (p. 6)

School segregation was upheld through a racist system that understood race through monoracial lens. The intermingling of history and racism is imperative in understanding how AfroLatina/os are disregarded in higher education research. For example, Braxton et al., 2011 make overarching conclusions about the persistence potential of SOC, by stating that “many students [of color] do not enter commuter institutions with a strong commitment to graduate” (p. 49), this statement automatically places blame on the students for their lack of success rather than identifying how institutions can increase SOC retention. Evidently, a deficit perspective continues to place SOC at a disadvantage. Perhaps an emphasis on underrepresented student experience in college may yield more fruitful findings in how to interrupt SOC departure.

### **Section Summary**

This section presented a number of topics that directly inform the experiences of people of color in the United States. In order to understand how AfroLatina/o

undergraduate students negotiate in-group acceptance, social-cultural and historical events must be considered. Despite racial differences being a social construction, they dictate how people are categorized and in turn how they are treated. The social investment in race has inadvertently persisted through time. Although law prohibits discrimination based on race and ethnicity, discrimination based on gradations of skin color is pervasive within all racial and ethnic groups – as well as between them. The historical legacy of U. S. racist underpinnings continues to manifest themselves in different ways. In the case of AfroLatina/os, they are forced to grapple with both Latin American and U. S. discriminatory practices and prejudices that reject their Blackness and deny their *Latinidad*.

The brief overview provided is only surface-level but it presents enough information to help inform the study on the delicate subject of discrimination based on skin tone. When AfroLatina/o students arrive to campus, they bring with them their personal stories, cultural experiences, and family histories. Their acclimation to campus is influenced by their experiences in everyday society. They are forced to traverse racial and cultural barriers set by historical discriminatory practices out of their control. On the one hand they are restricted on their affinity to Blackness and on the other their *Latinidad* is denied due to their skin tone. AfroLatina/os are not only forced to traverse discrimination within the U. S. racial binary but also required to consistently prove their loyalty to either group. Colleges and universities have an obligation to understand how such factors can impact the persistence of all their students – including AfroLatina/os.

## **Social Psychology Models**

The U. S. population continues to increasingly become more diverse and people of color are projected to outnumber Whites in the near future, making identity development of people of color central to contemporary research (French, Seidman, Allen, & Aber, 2006). Erikson (1968) first explored the issue of how race and ethnicity influences personal identity development. He suggested members of a minority community could internalize the negative views of society and develop a negative self-identity, providing a bleak perspective on people of color identity development. Since then, many researchers have sought to understand how ethnic and racial group membership affects identity development. Such research was utilized in lawsuits challenging the segregation of public schools (French et al., 2006), highlighting the importance of racial and ethnic identity in the educational system.

These early researchers primarily focused on racial development, for example, Cross (1978) and Parham, (1989) focused on Black college students, Arces (1981) on Chicano identity development, and Helms, (1995) on White identity development. They are all stage models and suggest that racial identity development occurs in a linear manner (Chavez & Guido-DiBrito, 1999; French et al., 2006). Furthermore, early development models evaluate race through a monoracial lens. Racial identity is a surface-level manifestation, placing emphasis on how physical appearance may influence how one is treated in society. “Definitions of race typically emphasize unique physical characteristics or phenotypes, such as skin pigmentation, texture of body hair, and facial features shared by members of a social group” (Ramos, Jaccard, & Guilamo-Ramos,

2003, p. 148). However, racial identity development models are unable to capture the homogeneity of ethnic groups. Consequently, two different forms of models emerged: racial identity development models and ethnic identity development models.

Since ethnicity is a conscious identification of distinct cultural values, behaviors, traditions, and beliefs (Chavez & Guido-DiBrito, 1999), monoracial development models did not consider how ethnic variables impact racial development. The one-dimensional models of race rarely explore, or acknowledge, the multiple layers of diversity (Reynolds & Pope, 1991), entirely neglecting the ethnic and racial diversity of the Latina/o community. Early researchers focus on dichotomization (i. e., Black v. White) and little attention was paid to within-group diversity. While these models provide measurable constructs from which to understand racial development, they depict an inaccurate picture of the complexity of the identity development process (Reynolds & Pope, 1991). Furthermore, they neglect to encompass the unique experiences of biracial and multiracial individuals, leaving a void in the identity development literature. In an attempt to fill the void, Poston (1990) and Root (1990) advanced separate models of biracial and multiracial identity development.

Previous identity development models did not allow the integration of several group identities (i.e., biracial and/or multiracial identities), where self-fulfillment was only reached when an individual arrived at a single ethnic identity. Yet, not all biracial people receive group acceptance, which creates conflict because the inherent models required some level of acceptance into a minority group during an immersion stage (Poston, 1990). Root (1990) based her model on biracial individuals who were at least



half-White and entering a period of turmoil due to their biracial identity. She focused on the negotiations they undergo in order to find acceptance (Renn, 2000). Nevertheless, Root neglects the experiences of those who are members of two minority racial groups. As such, AfroLatina/o identity development cannot be understood through the use of Root's model.

Poston (1990), on the other hand, acknowledged that biracial identity is complicated and difficult to navigate. He rejected the assumption that biracial people go through the process of rejecting their minority identity in favor of the dominant and noted that biracial individuals can be of two minority groups. Moreover, Poston illustrated that biracial individuals might experience rejection from group membership due to their biracial identity. However, despite the development of biracial and multiracial identity development models, both Poston (1990) and Root (1990) neglected to account for the experiences of AfroLatina/os who are part of an ethnic group (Latino) that extremely diverse in every definition of the word. Neither model suggests a process by which AfroLatina/os could make sense of how they negotiated their identities or the maturity of the process. The models also neglect to acknowledge what I call the AfroLatina/o paradox – the double-rejection they encounter for being the synthesis of the two largest minority groups in the United States while having to grapple with three distinct cultures.

Identity is so fluid that it can be defined internally by the self but also externally by others (Jones & McEwen, 2000). Identity development is an extremely intimate process, difficult to capture by any model. Phinney (1989) proposed a model of ethnic identity development but suggested that ethnic identity was merely one facet of

adolescence. However, ethnic and racial identity development is cross-sectional and an ongoing process (French et al., 2006). Latina/os are racially heterogeneous, hold a strong affinity to their country of origin, and embrace U. S. and Latina/o culture at the same time. Their cultural and ethnic diversity does not allow stage models to adequately capture their complexity and nuance. The feat of capturing Latina/os identity development process is complicated further when accounting for AfroLatina/os.

AfroLatina/os may endorse or adopt cultural norms from both the Black and Latino community, leading to the development of a unique identity. Their identity development is complicated by social-cultural experiences in the U. S. Ferdman and Gallegos (2001) determine although AfroLatina/os are part of a Latina/o subgroup, they are “aware of discrimination against themselves and other Latinos, they do not easily connect or identify with other Latino groups” (p. 52). Since AfroLatina/os experience society in a different manner, their acceptance into cultural affinity groups is more complicated.

[Subgroup Latina/os] prefer to identify almost exclusively with their own particular subgroup, which they view positively, and they may view other groups, including Latin[a/o], as deficient or inferior. Whites are not central to their thinking though they are conscious that whites can be barriers to their full inclusion. (Ferdman & Gallegos, 2001, p. 52)

Ferdman and Gallegos propose a model of racial identity development of Latina/os in the U. S. They place much emphasis on the racial negotiation process Latina/os undergo in attempting to solidify an identity. While the model emphasises the importance of race, it neglect to acknowledge the existence of AfroLatina/os. They do, however, recommend

that racial categories not be imposed upon Latina/os due to their inability to fully capture the racial diversity of Latina/os in the U. S.

### **Section Summary**

The double-minority status of AfroLatina/os has positioned them in an unfair situation. Their phenotype forces them into the Black category without regard for their self-identification. French et al. (2006) discovered despite cultural differences or history in the United States, participants who visibly appear Black reported similar experiences to African Americans because they were forced to accept their Blackness. The social investment in racial differences does not allow the recognition of AfroLatina/os as a legitimate identity. The dominant racial and ethnic identity development models fail to adequately capture the heterogeneity of Latina/os. The fusion of Poston's (1990) biracial identity development model with Ferdman and Gallegos' (2001) identity development of Latina/os model would produce a more acceptable ethnic identity development model. Nonetheless, it still leaves out components such as double-rejection, triple consciousness, and the negotiation of three cultures (Black, Latina/o, U.S.) AfroLatina/os are forced to contemplate.

Identity development models are essential in understanding student persistence because they help inform the type of student services to offer on college campuses. The absence of AfroLatina/os in both racial and ethnic development models translates to an oversight of their needs. As noted, their experiences cannot be understood as synonymous to light skinned Latina/os. The growing presence of Latina/os on college campuses by extension also means the progression of AfroLatina/os. Their matriculation demands

institutions provide resources that will help them feel welcome and acknowledged, but most importantly, persist to graduation. A key component of persistence is a campus climate that is conducive to their acclamation and facilitates their sense of belonging. The remainder of the chapter will elaborate on how sense of belonging differs for AfroLatina/os as compared to other SOC.

### **Sense of Belonging**

Much of the sense of belonging literature draws from Maslows' hierarchy of needs theory due to the importance it places on the innate need for acceptance and group belonging (Strayhorn, 2012). While this body of research is large, for the purposes of this chapter I will focus on sense of belonging research on college students. Earlier attempts at understanding student dropout behavior (see for example: Knoell, 1960, 1966; Sexton, 1965; Summerskill, 1965; Waller, 1964) inspired Spady (1970) to develop a theoretical construct of social and academic integration. However, Spady drew from theory that was descriptive but not predictive of college students' persistence. His model was comprised of concepts too complex for empirical testing. Consequently, the model was met with resistance and hesitation due to its limitations.

The need to better understand student departure propelled Tinto (1975) to develop the model of institutional departure. He proposes that in order for students to persist, they need to be fully integrated into the formal and informal academic systems, as well as the formal and informal social systems within the institution. Like Tinto (1975, 1987, 1994), many student development models (e.g., A. W. Astin, 1984; Bean, 1980; Berger, 1997; Nora, 1987; Schlossberg, 1989); hold sense of belonging as central to student integration

and success, largely because sense of belonging is essential in understanding students persistence.

Sense of belonging in higher education is particularly important because going to college requires navigating unfamiliar environments, interaction with strangers, and constructing a new community. If students are not engaged or find no community on campus, their persistence can be jeopardized. Sense of belonging has been defined a number of ways in academia in this study it is defined as:

students' perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the group (e.g., campus community) or others on campus (e. g., faculty, peers. (Strayhorn, 2012, p. 17)

Essentially, sense of belonging is a student's feeling of being valued by members of the college community and knowing that he or she comprises a thread of the institutional fabric.

In a study of first-year college students, Hausemann et al. (2007) found students who had more peer-group interactions, peer support, parental support, and interactions with faculty during their first year on campus, reported having a greater sense of belonging. In addition, researchers found that first-year social interactions on campus and initial social support received, were better determinants of sense of belonging than were academic experiences or demographic characteristics. When students' needs are not met, their motivation diminishes, negatively influencing their academic performance (Strayhorn, 2012). If students are not integrated as members of the college community they are more likely to withdraw. Overall, research has certified college students' sense

of belonging is highly associated with academic motivation (Freeman et al., 2007), institutional commitment, and intentions to persist (Hausmann et al., 2007).

Strayhorn (2012) synthesized the extant sense of belonging literature into three large themes: “belongingness as a concept, circumstances that engender (or thwart) belonging, and the relations between belonging and other outcomes or behaviors.” However, it is necessary to note diverse student populations experience sense of belonging differently. For example, Hurtado and Carter (1997) found not all activities in which Latina/o students engaged during college created a sense of belonging. In fact, membership in social-community and religious organizations were most significantly related to their sense of belonging. Remarkably, both organizational types are located external-to-campus (in the community) but nonetheless increased student’s sense on belonging on campus. This is particularly important to consider in understanding Latina/o college persistence.

Hausmann et al., (2007) indicate sense of belonging can influence intentions to persist for students – even before they step foot into a classroom and after controlling for institutional commitment, demonstrating the importance of institutions fostering an inclusive and welcoming environment for underrepresented students. It is imperative to acknowledge “sense of belonging may be a more culturally relevant way to measure minority students’ ‘connectedness,’ ‘attachment,’ or ‘membership’ to campus, thus accounting for more of their outcomes than other factors” (Strayhorn, 2012, p. 37). Thus, a more critically conscious synthesis of the sense of belonging literature would

potentially help practitioners, and researchers alike, better understand how SOC experience sense of belonging on college campuses.

### **Sense of Belonging for Students of Color**

A criticism of Tinto's (1994) model is that students are expected to assimilate into mainstream activities in order to succeed, which does not value culturally supportive alternatives to collegiate participation. As noted earlier, Latina/o students are more likely to persist when they engage in community events off campus. Evidently, Tinto did not consider how SOC might differ from "traditional" students. Johnson et al. (2007) suggest "rather than expecting students to bear sole responsibility for success through their integration into existing institutional structures, sense of belonging illustrates the interplay between the individual and the institution" (p. 526). Since sense of belonging is the feeling of being valued by members of the college community, the experiences of racial minorities can greatly vary by institution and social context. Institutions of higher education have a responsibility to all students of providing them with institutional structures and programs that change accordingly to student demographic shifts and needs.

There has been reproach of the "one size fits all" models because they do not account for the complexities that arise when SOC have to navigate unfamiliar spaces (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). Sense of belonging for Latina/o students is largely influenced by cultural factors and differs from traditional students in many ways. For example, Hurtado and Ponjuán (2005) established that Latina/o students who lived on campus or with their parents reported higher levels of sense of belonging than students who lived off campus. Clearly living at home or on campus demonstrated to be equally important for

Latina/o students, particularly due to the importance Latina/o culture places on family. Furthermore, activities that support or build the desire and/or ability of serving the community also increase their sense of belonging (Hurtado & Carter; Nuñez, 2009). Paradoxically, Nuñez (2009) found that Latina/os who were actively involved on campus, were also more likely to perceive an exclusionary climate. Thus, the interplay between culture, type of extracurricular involvement, and campus climate ultimately dictate sense of belonging for Latina/o students.

### **Section Summary**

Tinto's student integration theory overlooks the importance Latina/o students place on maintaining strong connections with external campus communities (Nuñez, 2009) and their culture. Although other student integration theories exist, extra emphasis is placed on Tinto due to its prominence. The sense of isolation, experiences of discrimination, and hostility that Latina/o students encounter are disregarded in Tinto's model. This is particularly problematic because rather than integrating Latina/o students into campus culture, they are being thrust into assimilation. The extant literature reviews the experiences of Latina/os students but no reference was found to AfroLatina/os. One could assume that the sense of isolation, experiences of discrimination, and hostility AfroLatina/o students encounter are more pervasive than those endured by light-to-fair skinned Latina/os. Factors which can drastically impact their sense of belonging and by extension their academic persistence.

Ultimately, Latina/o heterogeneity must be considered when generalizing about their student needs. It is important to note that not all AfroLatina/os encounter hostility or



encounter identity obscurity. It is possible AfroLatina/o students who enter campus with a strong sense of identity will encounter few obstacles in finding sense of belonging.

Romero and Roberts (1998) found minority students who reported a stronger sense of belonging to their racial and/or ethnic group were more likely to have positive attitudes towards other racial and ethnic groups. Latina/o students who experienced an increased sense of belonging also reported positive interactions with diverse peers (Hurtado & Ponjuán, 2005; Nuñez, 2009). This study sought to understand how AfroLatina/o undergraduate students negotiate in-group acceptance, which has been noted as imperative to developing a strong sense of belonging on campus.

### **Persistence**

Student persistence is among the most researched topics in higher education and has been defined a manner of different ways. For the purposes of this study persistence is define as the process of persevering and continuing toward an intended degree goal (Crisp & Nora, 2010). In particular, I was interested in persistence beyond freshman year of college – sophomore status and beyond. Sociological (e. g., Tinto 1994) and psychological (e. g., Bean 1980) theories have been utilized in order to explain student departure from academe. Paradoxically, efforts to improve retention seem to be ineffective (Reason, 2009). The evolution of persistence literature is represented through the incorporation of diverse variables and their impact on student persistence. Astin (1970) was coined the pioneer of college student persistence research. He first introduced an input-process-output model of student involvement but his later research (1975, 1985) was more notable (Metz, 2004). Astin's talent model (1975) suggested student

involvement was a result of certain characteristics innate of the student and the institution. Early on, he established variables such as the type of financial aid (i.e., loans, grants, work study, scholarships) directly influenced student persistence. While the financial aspect of the model is still relevant, the talent model ignored the ramifications of negative campus experiences for SOC, and how their persistence is affected by a adverse campus climate (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Hurtado & Ponjuán, 2005; Locks, Hurtado, Bowman, & Oseguera, 2008).

Tinto's (1975, 1987, 1994), student integration model is the most heavily cited in the literature and has been widely used in research to understand college student persistence. The model demonstrates that pre-college factors such as high school grades and courses taken heavily influence college persistence (Crisp & Nora, 2010). Yet, the model has weaknesses, “a major gap in Tinto’s theory and allied research is the role of external factors in shaping [student] perceptions, commitments, and preferences” (Cabrera, Castañeda, Nora, & Hengstler, 1992, p. 144). In fact, the model suggests student motivation and academic ability, in conjunction with institutional academic and social characteristics, directly influence student persistence (Cabrera et al.). Academic and social integration are central to the model and although the model is predictive of White students persistence, it fails to adequately assess SOC persistence.

The student integration model has also been criticized for its lack of applicability to nonresidential and commuter campuses (Braxton & Lien, 2000). The measure of academic integration has not been clearly defined and it fails to take into account the various methods SOC engage on campus (Braxton & Lien; Crisp & Nora, 2010). In

addition, the model fails to include all variables needed to understand student departure (Baird, 2000) and some of its concepts are vague – particularly social integration (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). The model largely uses student demographics to assess “student participation as opposed to an individualistic analysis of why one or another student is likely to attend and eventually graduate” (Tierney, 1992, p. 605). Nonetheless, academic researchers have heavily relied on this theory in order to understand student departure.

Bean (1980) asserted the main problem with Tinto’s (1975) model is,

...the definition of variables used in the analysis rendered the models unusable for path analysis...attention was not paid either to the recursiveness (directional causality) of the variables in the theoretical model or to the discreteness of the variables. (Bean, p. 156)

Consequently, Bean developed the psychological model of student retention through the adaptation of turnover in the workplace model. The model incorporated a psychological perspective and has a strong theoretical foundation that was empirically tested. His premise is “students are psychological beings and that collective issues of Sociology play a secondary role. The social environment is important only as it is perceived by the individual” (Bean & Eaton, 2000, p. 58). Unlike Tinto’s (1975, 1987, 1994) model of student integration, the psychological model of student retention can be utilized at different institution types and with diverse student populations. Yet, there are some fallacies with the model. For example, Bean and Easton (2000) wrote, “students who adopt the attitude that they will fit in certain academic environments are likely to become more academically integrated” (p. 49), which ultimately places the responsibility onto the

student without regard for institutional culture and campus climate. Although the model of student retention has innate flaws, it provides an empirical model from which to study student attrition and persistence.

Bean (1980) made other notable contributions to persistence literature. He combined Spady's (1970) social integration process model and Tinto's (1975) goal commitment model and derived five factors that influenced student persistence: demographics, student experiences on campus, environmental factors (i. e., family support and finances), attitudinal variables, and student attention (Metz, 2004). Notably, Bean's research identified the importance of the interaction between the student and the institution, as well as the influence of external factors (i. e., family, peers, community) on student persistence. Terenzini and Pascarella (1980) contributed to the college persistence scholarship by identifying the importance of faculty-student interaction. They determined the amount of time spent with faculty, both inside and outside the classroom, strongly influenced student persistence. This suggests the importance of faculty mentoring SOC or at the least having an awareness of their experiences.

Most of the persistence models hold White students as the standard without regard for the unique challenges SOC encounter. Castellanos and Jones (2004) demonstrate a relationship between college success for minority students and quality of high school education received. However, the academic and social integration aspects of the model have been heavily criticized, as they calls for students to fully immerse themselves in the dynamics of college life. "The distinction between students' interactions in the academic and social system and their actual psychological sense of identification and affiliation

with the campus community remains ambiguous” (Hurtado & Carter, 1997, p. 326). Moreover, the model is not generalizable to non-traditional students and ethnic or racial minorities. Tierney (1992) suggests the departure of ethnic and racial minorities from college may have different contextual meaning for them than their White counterparts. Hence, more research needs to be conducted to help illuminate the nuances of their experiences.

### **Students of Color Persistence**

In a critical assessment of persistence literature Tierney (2000) suggests “the system is hemorrhaging and rather than treating the problem we try to slow the bleeding” (p. 216). He suggests “at-risk” students are likely to persist when their identities are affirmed and their experiences are incorporated into the culture of the institution. Nonetheless, despite the diversification of higher education, little emphasis has been placed on alleviating SOC departure (Crisp & Nora, 2010; Freeman et al., 2007; Tierney, 2000). These findings have implications for all students but more specifically for SOC. Witkow, Huynh, and Fuligni (2015) establish familial obligations, financial burdens, and discrimination were negatively associated with persistence for SOC. In effect, ethnic differences in persistence were related to financial circumstances, SES, and high school GPA. This emphasizes the responsibility of institutions of higher education to pay attention to how family circumstances can directly influence SOC persistence.

Tierney (1992) proposes the wide use of Tinto’s (1975, 1987, 1994) student integration model has had negative consequences for SOC. “Tinto has misinterpreted the anthropological notions of ritual, and in doing so he has created [a] theoretical construct

with practical implication that hold potentially harmful consequences for racial and ethnic minorities” (p. 603). The most harmful aspect of the model is the social integration aspect, “the assumption is that a uniform set of values and attitudes remain in an institution and that it is the individual’s task to adopt to the systems” (Tierney, 1992, p. 607). Rather than relying on Tinto’s (1994) model of student integration, some scholars (i. e., Berger, 2000; Tierney, 1999) suggest that Bourdieu’s theory of social reproduction could better explain SOC persistence.

Bourdieu's (1977) theory of social reproduction has several constructs that are applicable to the study of student attrition. Although various forms of capital are captured through the model, cultural capital is easily applicable to higher education. Cultural capital has symbolic value – it is defined as access to resources and knowledge that is only available to those of the upper class – disadvantaging all others. This knowledge is not taught in schools but rather learned through social interaction and socialization within exclusive circles. Bourdieu’s (1977) theory is often interpreted by applying a deficit perspective to the Latina/o and White educational attainment gap, suggesting students who lack cultural capital need to somehow be “fixed” (Yosso, 2005). Contrasting Bourdieus’ (1986) deficit model, Yosso (2005) utilizes Latina/o critical race theory (LatCrit) to establish the concept of community cultural wealth, which challenges the marginalizing misconception that people of color have no form(s) of cultural capital. Yosso identifies various forms of cultural wealth demonstrating SOC have numerous funds of knowledge and are indeed bearers of information – unfortunately these forms of capital are not recognized as valuable by established institutions. Nonetheless, she places

strong emphasis on the attributes SOC bring with them to college which have been demonstrated to help them persist.

Studies that focus on the applicability of the student integration model on SOC neglect to include AfroLatina/os in their scholarship. Their experiences are generalized within the broader Latina/o ethnic group. Tierney (1992) suggests a radical reorientation on how institutions of higher education conceptualize and construct “multicultural” environments on campus. Overall, the wide application of Tinto’s model has “not only overlook[ed] the history of ethnic oppression and discrimination in the U.S. but [is] also... theoretically flawed” (Tierney, 1999, p. 80). Thus, in order to best understand the experiences of AfroLatina/o college students and their persistence, one must understand the implications of being AfroLatina/o in the United States. Personal and lived experiences in effect carry over to campus life and largely inform their on-campus experiences and interactions.

### **Section Summary**

The persistence models are not generalizable to SOC. As Tierney (1992) suggests, SOC departure may differ from their White counterparts. Similar to sense of belonging, the experiences of AfroLatina/os cannot be understood through the study of Latina/os as a heterogeneous group. Student persistence is contingent on various factors some of which vary greatly within ethnic groups. Thus, in order to understand what factors influence AfroLatina/o college student’s persistence, one must understand where traditional models have failed in accounting for their unique experiences. The wide use of Tinto’s model could be problematic for AfroLatina/os, particularly because it supports

assimilation into campus culture that may not be perceived as welcoming for non-Whites. It remains unclear if AfroLatina/os are extended the opportunity to assimilate due to their double-minority status or if it precludes them. Assimilation requires that an individual reject their cultural traits and adopt dominant culture, yet, there is no guarantee SOC will ever fully be accepted. This is problematic at multiple levels but for Latina/o students it would require them to abandon activities that have demonstrated to increase their sense of belonging on campus (see sense of belonging section).

Overall, although Tinto's model of student integration is widely cited, it overlooks important component that could help us understand SOC persistence. Models like Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth, which has an inherent understanding of ethnic and racial student diversity, is critical to understanding the diverse experiences of SOC. Nonetheless, community cultural wealth fails to account for the double-rejection AfroLatina/os encounter as well as the discrimination they endure due to their dark(er) skin. As such, the study seeks to contribute to the persistence literature through the identification of factors that influence AfroLatina/o college students.

### **Theoretical Frameworks**

The study of AfroLatina/o students is an emerging field in American higher education. Based on the extant literature about student persistence, sense of belonging, and racial and ethnic identity development, four main constructs emerged that served as factors in assessing AfroLatina/o students experiences in higher education: academic outcomes, sense of belonging, Black and Latina/o race relations, and the social



construction of race. In addition, demographic variables such as country of origin, language, generational status, cultural affinity, and so forth can affect individual experiences. Thus, such information was gathered through the administration of a demographic survey. I felt they were particularly important to gather given the vast diversity of the Latina/o ethnic group.

I selected two theoretical frameworks from which to assess AfroLatina/os experiences: colorism (Walker, 1983) and borderlands theory (Anzaldúa, 2007). While other theoretical lenses could have been utilized, the combined use of borderlands and colorism adequately capture the constant identity negotiation process AfroLatina/os endure, while also incorporating the role of skin tone gradient and within group prejudices based on skin color.

### **Colorism**

Colorism allows for a critical analysis of how phenotype (skin color) impacts in-group acceptance. The literature review underscored colorism as a critical concept within the Latina/o community and a deterministic factor of in-group acceptance. Colorism (Walker, 1983) was utilized to assess if skin color impacted in-group acceptance and persistence for AfroLatina/o college students. Colorism is a global phenomenon closely tied to beauty and group membership (Finkelman, 2014). Historically, it has been used as a form of oppression through a hierarchy that posits Whites at the top and Blacks at the bottom (Harvey et al., 2014). As stated throughout this chapter, AfroLatina/os encounter discrimination from Latina/os due to their African features and dark skin (Cruz-Janzen, 2001, 2002; Flores & Jiménez Román, 2009). Thus, the use of colorism as a framework

helped discern if skin color impacts AfroLatina/o college students as they seek to gain group membership on campus.

Walker (1983) writes about the rejection of Blackness within the Black community. The darker the person, the more rejection and displacement they encountered. What is particularly noteworthy is the fact that prejudice within the Black community was just as, or even more, pervasive than the hostility they encountered from Whites. The social investment in Whiteness is just as pervasive in the Black community as it is in Latin America and within the U. S. Latina/o population. Although intragroup discrimination is widely documented in Latin American countries, there is no term equivalent to colorism in the Spanish language. Although google does offer a translation for the term, the acknowledgment of its pervasiveness though Latin America is widely ignored.

The interaction between colorism and *mestizaje* is fascinating. The modern day Latina/os are a direct result of the historical mixture between Indigenous, French, Portuguese, Spanish colonizers, and Africans. The word *mestiza/o* defines such a mixture. Shortly after Mexico gained its independence, José Vasconcelos wrote the infamous essay “*La Raza Cósmica*” where he advanced the notion of a fifth race, a cosmic race, *el mestizaje* (Vasconcelos, 1966). The term was adopted as a national identity. It united a very divided nation and was embraced as an identity of pride throughout Latin American countries. Yet, Vasconcelos visualized *mestizaje* through a Darwinian framework – the undesirable, weak, and non-White traits would eventually be bred out of *mestizaje*. There was an intentional movement towards strengthening

European traits while rejecting Indigenous lineage, and completely ignoring African identity. Thus, although there is no equivalent to colorism in the Latina/o community, I argue that *mestizaje* serves a similar purpose.

### **Borderlands Theory**

Anzaldúa (2007) was inspired by W. E. B. Dubois' ideas on double consciousness but she extended the notion to the experiences of Chicanos growing up on the U. S. – Mexican border. She inadvertently captured the AfroLatina/o experience in borderlands theory. That is, she acknowledged Latina/os live between two countries, “two social systems, two languages, two cultures, resulting in understanding experientially the contingent nature of social armaments” (Anzaldúa, 2007 p. 7). Borderlands theory provides a framework with which to assess the constant identity negotiation AfroLatina/os encounter. It allows for a deeper understanding of the multiple oppressions experienced by AfroLatina/os but also to understand how they celebrate and embrace their dualistic identities – that of Blackness and Latinidad. Anzaldúa successfully blurred the lines between language, culture, experiences, and identity. Applying borderlands theory to the study leveraged the experiences of AfroLatina/o students as meaningful, important, and unique.

Borderlands upholds “it is possible to both understand and reject, to love and detest, to be loyal and question, and above all to continue to seek enlightenment out of the ambiguity of contradiction of all social existence” (Anzaldúa, 2007, p. 5). The double-minority status of AfroLatina/os could embark them on a life long journey where they experience extremes (i. e., love and detest, loyalty and question, acceptance an

rejection) simultaneous. In addition, Anzaldúa draws from the historic past, acknowledges the role of colonization on her own self-identification process, and identifies flaws with *mestizaje*. She code switches from English to Spanish, and Spanglish to Nahuatl, and back again. She presents Mexican colonial history as the antithesis to her new *mestiza* identity, which is embedded in the rejection of *Indigenismo*, and everything non-European.

An important aspect of borderlands theory is the fact that oppressions are not ranked or conceptualized as static, “rather they are recognized as fluid systems, that take on different forms and nuances depending on the context” (Anzaldúa, 2007, p. 7). Evidently, it allows for many forms of oppression to be articulated but also easily identify forms of resistance. Most importantly, individuals’ various forms of oppressions are conceptualized through their unique experiences and circumstances. Borderlands allows the flexibility to understand their experiences as unique and distinct.

Anzaldúa wrote about her own experiences of living on the U. S. – Mexican border, yet, her theoretical framework transcends into the psychological, cultural, sexual, and spiritual borders that many are forced to cross and/or live between. Similarly, AfroLatina/os are forced to live in a borderlands, a place of contradictions and constant crossings. They live between three cultures (U.S., Black, and Latina/o), between languages (English, Spanish, Spanglish, Creole, and Patua Creole), forced to make sense of their multiple identities and constantly explaining why they look as they do.

## **Integrating the Two Theories**

Understanding how colorism manifests itself within U. S. Latina/os groups is particularly important in assessing the experiences of AfroLatina/s on campus. Borderlands provides the ability to incorporate multiple time frames through an assessment of how Indigenous, colonial, and *mestizaje* impact their self-identification. However, there are two aspects missing from borderlands theory: discrimination based on skin gradients and the fusion of being both Black-and-Latina/o. Thus, the use of colorism as a secondary framework allows for the critical analysis of the importance of skin tone gradient in their acceptance or rejection into peer groups on campus. As previously indicated, colorism is not a recognized phenomenon within the Latina/o community, however, *mestizaje* has been utilized as a racial ideology favoring European lineage and has served a similar function to colorism.

The combined use of both theories allows for a more nuanced understanding of how AfroLatina/o college student mold their racial, ethnic, and cultural identities, if identity development impacts in-group sense of belonging, and if in-group sense of belonging impacts their academic persistence. Moreover, the combined use of these two theoretical frameworks lead to a more thorough understanding of how AfroLatina/o students make meaning of their experiences on campus.

## **Why not Intersectionality Framework**

Intersectionality framework has been utilized in higher education and other fields to better assess the experiences of marginalized groups within the macro levels of society, within a particular time in history, tying individual experiences to group membership

(Wijeyesinghe & Jones, 2014). More specifically, intersectionality “framework does not seek to unveil how each person within a marginalized group or many groups develops his or her sense of self under systems of oppression.” (Wijeyesinghe & Jones, 2014, p. 10). The purpose of this study is not to assess how AfroLatina/os are marginalized within the macro levels of society. The purpose is to understand intragroup discrimination and how skin tone gradient impacts that sense of belonging on campus – and by extension academic persistence.

Skin tone gradient is a biological cline, it is not definitive, and there is no clear indication of when a person crosses over to be declared Black, Brown, or White. Thus, group membership based on skin color cannot be as easily discerned. Intersectionality assessed the intersection of different forms of discrimination and how they impact a particular community but AfroLatina/os are a sub-group of Latina/os. I was interested in understanding the embodiment of AfroLatinidad, the individual experience, and not necessarily AfroLatina/os as a group, hence, the use of a phenomenological approach. Intersectionality is not utilized as a framework for understanding individual experiences. “Honoring the day-to-day experiences of each person, however, is not a core function of intersectionality” (Wijeyesinghe & Jones, 2014, p. 11). Overall, the primary focus of this study is not to understand how different forms of oppression impact AfroLatina/os but rather to discern how they mold their individual identities. Nonetheless, prejudice and discrimination are acknowledged in the study but are not the prime factors being considered.

Finally, I look beyond the intersectionality of identities and assess how skin tone gradient impacts participant's lives. Intersectionality assumes similarities based on intersection of identities but participants have different life experiences, childhoods, support systems, nation of origin, home structures, and campus experiences – all of which inform their perception of self, society, and ultimately their AfroLatinidad.

### **Chapter Summary**

This chapter draws from sociology, psychology, anthropology, Latin American studies, ethnic studies, and African diaspora studies in order to understand the experiences of AfroLatina/os in the United States. The homogenous approach to assessing Latina/os in higher education has overlooked their heterogeneity – and by default AfroLatina/os. The extant literature suggests AfroLatina/os encounter a double rejection due to their prominent African features, dark skin, and language spoken. They encounter rejection in the Latina/o community due to their dark skin and/or African features. In African American circles they initially are accepted but once they speak Spanish, they are accused of wanting to better themselves, and consequently rejected. Complicating matters, AfroLatina/os have a panethnic identity informed by long held historical prejudices within Latin American countries. When Latina/os immigrate they bring with them prejudices and stereotypes that when aggregated with U. S. racist history position AfroLatina/os in an unfavorable situation.

Historical and contemporary forms of prejudice and rejection of African lineage thrust AfroLatina/os into abeyance. Little is known about how they negotiate in-group acceptance, if it impacts sense of belonging and by extension their academic persistence.

Higher education sense of belonging literature posits SOC tend to gravitate towards students with whom they share identities – namely race, ethnicity, and culture. Yet, the study of Latina/os as a homogenous group has overlooked intragroup experiences. In addition, dominant persistence models are not generalizable to SOC – and much less AfroLatina/o students. SOC departure may differ from their White counterparts and there could be much intra-ethnic group differences as well. Similar to sense of belonging, the experiences of AfroLatina/os cannot be understood through the study of Latina/os as a heterogeneous group. Student persistence is contingent on various factors some of which vary greatly within ethnic groups. As such, the purpose of this study is to understand the experiences of AfroLatina/o college students as unique and distinct from those of Latina/os as a whole.



### **Chapter 3: Method**

This chapter describes the research methods utilized to assess the experiences of AfroLatina/o undergraduate college students. The purpose of this study is to understand the educational and identity development experiences of AfroLatina/o college students at Schomburg College. This chapter presents the research methods utilized in this phenomenological study and outlines the methods employed to answer the three research questions. The three overarching research questions guiding the study were:

1. How do AfroLatina/o college students mold their racial, ethnic, and/or cultural identities? Does history play a role?
2. How do AfroLatina/o undergraduate students at a small, urban public college, negotiate in-group acceptance?
3. What social and cultural factors do AfroLatina/o college students share that impact their persistence?

The first research question is concerned with understanding the process AfroLatina/os undergo in molding and shaping their ethnic, racial, and cultural identities within the United States and on campus. AfroLatina/os are confronted with a fluctuating cultural identity that ranges among and between “Latino, Black and US American dimensions of lived social realities” (Flores and Jiménez Román, 2009, p. 321). That constant negotiation process could differ by environment or location and could take on a different form on campus compared to other spaces. The second and third questions are directly related to their experiences on campus, more specifically how they negotiate in-group acceptance and if it impacts their college persistence. Given the purpose of this

study is to understand the unique experiences of AfroLatina/o students, the embodiment of their identities, and personal experiences on campus, a phenomenological approach was implemented. Phenomenology allows for an in-depth understanding of the lived experiences of those being assessed. Since the process of identity development is extremely complex and personal, phenomenology allows for an understanding of what it means to embody the identity of AfroLatina/o and to identify commonalities between participants.

This chapter provides a detailed description of the research design, methodology, and instrumentation. The ensuing chapter include the following section: (1) research method and design, (2) population sampling, (3) instrumentation, (4) collection procedures, and (5) data analysis.

### **Qualitative Research**

The study was grounded in qualitative research methods, “qualitative researchers seek data that represents personal experience in particular situations” (Stake, 2010, p. 88). Findings are not meant to be generalizable but are representative of the AfroLatina/o student experience at a small, urban, commuter, public, college campus in the Northeastern United States. Creswell (2009) indicates that qualitative research is a “means for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem” (p. 4). At the core of this study is understanding how AfroLatina/o students contextualize and navigate identity development and negotiate in-group membership. Participants articulated and recounted their personal experiences through a demographic questionnaire, pre and post interviews, and a focus group.

Qualitative methods allow access to an in-depth understanding and appreciation of participants' experiences through their own voice.

A natural tenant of qualitative research is that data collection takes place at the natural setting, in effect, participants were interviewed in their own environment and not in a laboratory or unfamiliar setting (Creswell, 2009). A natural setting allows participants to feel comfortable and provide more insight into the phenomenon of interest. Consequently, this research study was conducted at Schomburg College where the students were already enrolled. It provided them with an additional level of comfort, which I believe helped them reflect about their experiences on campus. Another tenant of qualitative research is that theory “emerges from the researcher’s observations and interviews out in the real world rather than in the laboratory or academy” (Patton, 2002, p. 11). This is of particular importance when vulnerable populations are being assessed. In the case of AfroLatina/os in higher education, the lack of research about their experiences on campus has led to them being overlooked. Conducting the study at Schomburg College provided students with the opportunity to better reflect about their experiences on campus, yielding more rich and detailed information. Research informs the development of student services, support programs, and campus activities by helping identify the most pressing needs of their student populations. Yet, given the lack of research on AfroLatina/os in higher education, college services are being implemented without the consideration of their needs nor the ability to assess if what is being offered indeed supports their persistence.

Qualitative research could help inform the development of student services because its methods are designed to gain in-depth understanding of the phenomena being studied and reduces generalizability – as compared to quantitative methods (Patton, 2002). A limitation of qualitative research is that it places the researcher as central to the work and “it is a form of interpretive inquiry in which the researcher makes an interpretation of what they see, hear, and understand” (Creswell, 2009, p. 176). As such, the researchers’ background, history, context, and prior knowledge of the phenomenon cannot be separated from their findings. In order to address this limitation, I remained as objective as possible, journaled after each interview, and member checked with my writing partner in order to reduce bias.

Pre and post, one-on-one interviews were conducted following a semi-structured, open-ended interview design. In addition, one focus group was held and followed a semi-structured open-ended question design. Participants were asked to share their experiences of identity development, sense of belonging, and academic persistence. Study participants included self-identified AfroLatina/os undergraduate students at a small, urban, commuter, public, college campus in the Northeastern United States who were at least sophomores in class standing. There were a total number of twelve (n=12) participants who self-identified as AfroLatina/o and fulfilled participant guidelines. Semi-structured interviews were utilized because they are designed to yield rich and detailed information about the participant’s experiences and how they make meaning of the phenomenon of interest (Creswell, 2009; Patton, 2002). Thus, a phenomenological approach was most appropriate for this study.

## **Phenomenology**

AfroLatina/os encounter a unique experience in the United States. They are assumed to be African-American, Black or African immigrants but culturally, ethnically, and racially they could identify differently. The complexity of their experiences can only be understood through their own voice. Phenomenology focuses on “exploring how human beings make sense of experiences and transform experiences into consciousness, both individually and as shared meaning” (Patton, 2002, p. 104). In order to gain such insight, phenomenology requires the researcher to conduct in-depth interviews with those who are directly experiencing the phenomenon of interest (Creswell, 2009; Patton, 2002). In-depth interviews allowed me to understand the nature and/or meaning AfroLatina/o undergraduate student’s place on their daily experiences on campus. This process is beneficial to both the researcher and the participant. The researcher gathers information directly from those experiencing the phenomenon and the participants develop great insight into their individual experiences through reflection.

Since phenomenology is concerned with the shared experiences of a group and the end goal is to understand the essence of that experience, small samples of at least nine participants are required in a study (Creswell, 2009). This study recruited a sample of twelve (n=12) self-identified AfroLatina/o undergraduate college students, eight (n=8) participated in both pre and post interviews. Three other participants expressed a desire to participate in the post interview but time limitations and geographic restrictions inhibited a face-to-face meeting. I decided the sensitive nature of the study required a face-to-face interview and thus was unable to hold an interview with those three participants. One

participant did not reply to the call for a second interview. Detailed interviews allowed me to understand what it means to embody their *AfroLatinidad* and how they interpret such experiences (Patton, 2002). Patton emphasizes a clear distinction between a phenomenological perspective as opposed to a phenomenological study. The study was a phenomenological study, which “focuses on descriptions of what people experience and how it is that they experience what they experience” (Patton, p. 107). I was interested in learning how AfroLatina/os experience the intersectionality of the social construction of race, in-group sense of belonging, colorism, and academic persistence. Patton (2002) asserts comprehensive phenomenological research gets to the basics of “how people experience some phenomenon—how they perceive it, describe it, feel about it, judge it, remember it, make sense of it, and talk about it, and talk about it with others” (p. 104). As such, I wanted to understand how AfroLatino/s embody their multiple identities and utilize study findings to inform the direction of future research.

In order to present the complexity of participant’s lived experiences, chapter 4 provides vignettes of each participant. The vignettes consist of brief introduction to each participant followed by self-styled narratives (Miller, 2015). Through the incorporation of vignettes in a phenomenological study, the complexity of their unique experiences is highlighted without reducing it to segmented quotes throughout the findings (Stake, 2010). Vignettes yield a rich portrayal of how AfroLatina/os make sense of their identities, lived experiences, and lineage and how all the combination of all those impacts them on campus.

Findings yielded constructs utilized by AfroLatina/o students in everyday life that help them make sense of the world. In addition to individual interviews, a focus group was held so they could talk in a group about their experiences on campus. The focus group was not originally planned but through conversations with the participants, they requested a focus group so they could meet other AfroLatina/os on campus (more details are provided in the focus group section). The interviews and focus group provided greater understanding of the phenomenon through “uncovering meaning contained within conversation or text” (Snape & Spencer, 2012, p. 12). Thus, a phenomenological approach was fitting to help uncover the essence of their shared experiences, understand how they mold their racial, cultural, and ethnic identities, and negotiate in-group membership on campus.

### **Research Design**

The study was interested in the lived experiences of undergraduate, AfroLatina/o students at a small, urban, commuter, public, college campus in the Northeastern United States. In chapter 2, the review of the literature demonstrates social, political, and historical context directly influence the identity development process of AfroLatina/os. The use of qualitative methods was particularly fitting because qualitative researchers “often use a lens to view their studies, such as the concept of culture, central to ethnography, or gendered, racial, or class differences” (Creswell, 2009, p. 176). Thus, in order to best understand the experiences of AfroLatina/os, and to value them as unique and important, a qualitative research design was employed. The sources of data collection

consisted of a demographic sheet, individual interviews (pre and post), a focus group, and observations (Creswell).

### **Site Selection**

There is no official or systematic way of collecting data on AfroLatina/os but some reports (United States Census Bureau, n.d., n.d., 2011), as well as AfroLatina/o scholars (Landale & Oropesa, 2002; Nunez, 2006; Romo, 2011), suggest that they tend to concentrate in large urban areas – with the largest concentration being in the Northeastern United States. Therefore, the study was conducted on a public commuter college located in a large urban area in the Northeastern United States. Purposive sampling was employed since the study was concerned with the unique experiences of AfroLatina/o undergraduate students. Purposive sampling allowed for the selection of “information-rich cases whose study illuminate[d] the questions under study” (Patton, 2002, p. 230). Given the implementation of purposive sampling, the research study was conducted in the Bronx, New York, where the largest concentrations of AfroLatina/os residing in the United States is found. In order to maintain anonymity of the participants and the research site, both were given pseudonyms. The research site was given the pseudonym of Schomburg College and each participant selected his or her pseudonym.

According to their latest Fact Book available online (2014), Schomburg College has a Carnegie Classification of Master’s College’s and Universities, the City University of New York serves as their governing entity. In 2014 their total undergraduate student enrollment was 10,326 where nearly half (49%) of the total undergraduate population is comprised of *Hispanic* students followed by 31% *Black/Non-Hispanic*. The remaining



20% is includes (in descending order) White/Non-Hispanic, Asian/Pacific Islander, Non-Resident Alien, and American Indian/Alaskan Native. Despite the college not collecting AfroLatina/o student data, Census figures indicated there was a substantial AfroLatina/o population attending Schomburg College due to its location in the Bronx. In addition, the majority (80%) of its student population is comprised of *Hispanic* and *Black/Non-Hispanic*. The lack of additional racial and ethnic categories make it difficult to determine exactly how many students identify beyond the five socially constructed categories.

Schomburg College was selected because of its location and very diverse student body. I was able to gain support at the University System level for the study given the importance of the topic. They requested that I share findings with them along with recommendations on how to support their AfroLatina/o student population.

Administrators at the University System level connected me with student affairs staff at Schomburg College who graciously agreed to support the study and aided in the recruitment of participants. They helped distribute the recruitment emails (Appendix B), posted fliers throughout campus (Appendix C), and even included the call for participants on their campus newsletter (Appendix D). In addition, the staff provided all logistical support including reserving rooms, access to the Internet, seating area for students, and receptionist support. Consequently, I was able to recruit an appropriate number of self-identified AfroLatina/o students for the study and had a private office for the duration of my stay on campus.

## **Participant Selection**

A purposeful sampling method was implemented in the recruitment of participants. Patton (2002) indicates, “purposeful sampling is based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned” (p. 76). I was particularly interested in the experiences of AfroLatina/o undergraduate students on campus. Accordingly, purposeful sampling was appropriate. Merriam (2014) recommends the researcher establish strict criteria for selecting the sample and warns that the criteria must be aligned to the purpose of the research study. As such, all study participants fulfilled the following criteria established for participation. They all (1) self-identify as AfroLatina/o, (2) are an undergraduate student at Schomburg College, and (3) hold at least a sophomore standing. The selection criteria lead to the successful recruitment of twelve (n=12) participants whose personal stories helped answer the three research questions.

## **Sampling**

Patton (2002) advances that central to purposeful sampling lies the search for information-rich cases because “one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the inquiry” (p. 230). Participants were first recruited through homogenous sampling and then a snowball design was implemented. Homogenous sampling is used when the researcher seeks to understand and describe a particular group in depth. Only self-identified AfroLatina/os were recruited for the study since at the core of the study rested a deliberate attempt at understanding their experiences as a Latina/o subgroup in the United States.

Once participants were recruited through homogenous sampling, they received an email confirmation (Appendix E) where they were asked to help recruit other AfroLatina/o students for the study. Snowball sampling helped extend the recruitment efforts through the use of study participants. “A particular advantage of snowball sampling is its cultural competence and the inherent trust it engenders among potential participants.” The use of snowball sampling was required due to the unique identification of AfroLatina/os. Since the Federal Government does not officially recognize AfroLatina/os as a group but rather clumps them into the “Hispanic” category, people who may be considered AfroLatina/o by others may not self-identify as such. Similarly, some may identify as Black and Latina/o but not as AfroLatina/o.

The snowball sampling strategy “finds an individual who has the desired characteristics and uses the person’s social networks to recruit similar participants in a multistage process” (Robins Sadler et al., 2010, p. 370). As such the use of both sampling techniques were required in order to maximize the recruitment of AfroLatina/o students attending Schomburg College. Overall, asking study participants to help identify others yielded the recruitment of two (n=2) AfroLatina/o students who otherwise may not have responded to the original recruitment efforts.

### **Pilot Study**

A pilot study was conducted during the summer of 2015 at Schomburg College where twelve (n=12) AfroLatina/o students were interviewed individually through a semi-structured format (Appendix F: Pilot Study Interview Questions). Research questions were developed through the use of relevant literature, which concentrated

around four main constructs: identity, cultural affinity, in-group sense of belonging, and academic outcomes. The questions were open-ended and participants were only probed when it was necessary to gain more in-depth information. The pilot study received Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval and the application was amended for the purposes of this study. The pilot study was beneficial as it provided valuable insight and the opportunity to test research questions. Teijlingen and Hundley (2001) assure pilot studies help with: the development and testing of research instruments, assess the feasibility of a full study, help inform the research protocol, establish whether the sampling techniques are appropriate, assess the likely success of recruitment approaches, help identify logistical problems that might arise with the methods implemented, help determine the appropriate sampling size, collect preliminary data, uncover potential problems with data analysis, develop research questions and research plan, and finally, convince other stakeholders that the main study is worth supporting.

The pilot study provided the perfect opportunity to test the research instrument and to determine if the interview questions were appropriate in helping answer the research questions. Based on the initial interviews it became evident participants wanted to speak about their experiences in a group setting. As such, I decided it would be beneficial to include a focus group to help uncover the shared social experiences of AfroLatina/o students.

Focus groups explicitly use group interaction as part of the method. This means that instead of the researcher asking each person to respond to a question in turn, people are encouraged to talk to one another: asking questions, exchanging anecdotes and commenting on each others' experiences and points of views. (Kitzinger, 1995, p.299)

All students who were interviewed for the pilot study were invited to participate in a second round of interviews as well as to partake in the focus group.

### **Data Collection**

The study consisted of a demographic questionnaire, interviews conducted in the pilot study, a follow up interview, and a focus group (Figure 1: Data Collection Methods). Mertens (2010) suggests that in order to gain the best insight possible, the researcher must spend some time with the participants prior to conducting interviews in order to establish rapport. Therefore, prior to beginning the interview, participants were briefed with a quick overview of the purpose of the study, assurance of anonymity, and created space for participants to ask questions. Many participants were curious about what would be done with the data, what would happen during the interview, and how their participation would benefit the study. They were informed of the procedures including data collection and reporting the findings. In addition, they were informed they would have access to an electronic copy of the dissertation study once completed.

Prior to beginning each interview, I summarized the procedures of the study, walked them through the student consent form (Appendix G), and proceeded to administer the demographic questionnaire (Appendix A). The purpose of the demographic questionnaire was to gather more background information about the participants in order to better understand their experiences. The demographic questionnaire consisted of family nation of origin, educational background, and participant's self-identification questions. Once the consent to participate form was

signed, by both the researcher and participant, the demographic questionnaire was administered, followed by the actual semi-structured interview. Participants were asked to select a pseudonym in order to assure their anonymity. From that point on, participants were only referred to by their chosen pseudonym. Every interview was digitally recorded for its entirety and was later transcribed. All recordings began with the study name, participant pseudonym, date, and time. After the interviews were transcribed verbatim, the original recordings were permanently deleted.

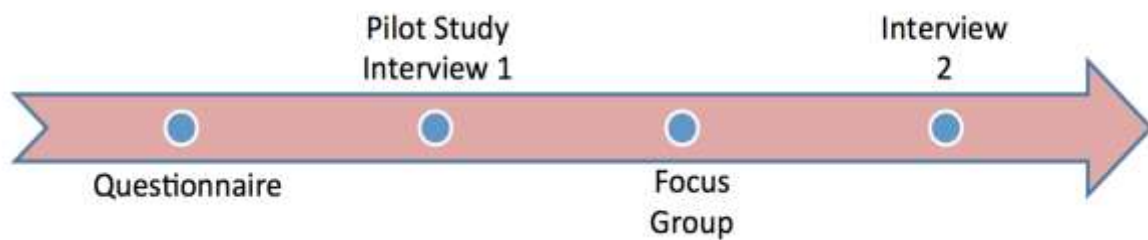


Figure 1: Data Collection Methods

### **Focus Group**

During the pilot study it became evident early on that participants wanted to meet each other. They were curious about how many people had answered the call to participate in the study. They would ask questions about other students' experiences and were eager to learn how many other students identified as AfroLatina/o on campus. It became evident that a focus group would not only yield more robust information but it would also serve to connect participants with one another. Since focus groups involve discussion and listening to others, they provide participants with the opportunity to reflect on what they want to say and better articulate themselves – yielding information

otherwise overlooked by participants (Ritchie & Lewis, 2012). The use of a focus group was particularly enticing given the urgency some participants expressed in meeting other participants. “Focus interviews are particularly useful... research participants can express multiple perspectives on a similar experience” (Glesne, 2011, p. 130). A dynamic conversation unfolded, as all participants were eager to share their experiences with one another.

Glesne (2011) suggests that a size of six to ten participants generally works best. In addition, the researcher serving as the moderator can direct a smaller group into conversation but Glesne warns if the focus group size is too large, small group conversations can form making it difficult to facilitate and record. I conducted only one focus group due to time limitations. The focus group consisted of seven ( $n=7$ ) participants, all of who had participated in the pilot study (pre interview). Participants were asked four semi-structured questions and I served as the facilitator (Appendix H: Focus Group Questions). The focus group was only scheduled to last one and a half hours but the conversation was so rich that it was extended to two hours. At the end of the two hours, I had to end the focus group due to time constraints. The participants continued the conversation outside the meeting space and many exchanged contact information.

I took observational notes during the interviews and focus group and wrote a brief reflection at the end of each one. Patton (2002) suggests personal notes can later be used during the data analysis phase, which could be helpful in triangulating findings. All interviews and the focus group were audio recorded. All participants were informed that in order to participate in the study they needed to fill out the participant agreement form

as well as the demographic questionnaire. In order to assure anonymity, only the researcher has access to the original demographic questionnaires, consent forms, and verbatim transcriptions. The focus group audio recording was transcribed and later deleted.

### **Data Analysis**

Once all the interviews and focus group audio recordings were transcribed, the data analysis process began (Figure: 2 Data Analysis). In addition to the transcriptions, personal notes, and reflections were utilized to assist in identifying emerging themes. To facilitate coding data and to identify common themes across participant interviews, focus group, and researcher notes, electronic software Atlas.ti was utilized. The use of computer-assisted qualitative data management and analysis tools can be very beneficial and can speed up the “process of locating coded themes, grouping data together in categories, and comparing passages in transcriptions or incidents from field notes” (Patton, 2002, p. 442). Although Atlas.ti helps organize, sort, and quickly retrieve the data, the researcher is the one who interprets data and gives it meaning. The researcher decides “what things go together to form a pattern, what constitutes a theme, what to name it, and what meaning to extract” (Patton, p. 442). The overall benefit of utilizing Atlas.ti for this study was the ability to handle lots of data, identifying and grouping themes, and comparing data.

In order to assure proper data analysis deliberate and precise steps were followed through the longevity of the study. Creswell (2009) offers appropriate steps to consider when investigating qualitative data: The first step involves preparing the raw data (i.e.,



transcripts, observations, researcher notes). Second, reading through all the data to gain a general sense of the overall meaning of the data collected. Third, begin detailed analysis and coding process. Creswell (2009) defines coding as “the process of organizing the material into chunks or segments of text before bringing meaning to information” (p. 186). Fourth, the coding process generates “descriptions of the setting or people as well as categories or themes for analysis” (p. 189). He suggests coding should generate five to seven categories for a research study. Fifth, identify how the theme will be represented through the use of qualitative data. The final step involves making an interpretation or deriving meaning of the data through the use of theoretical framework(s).

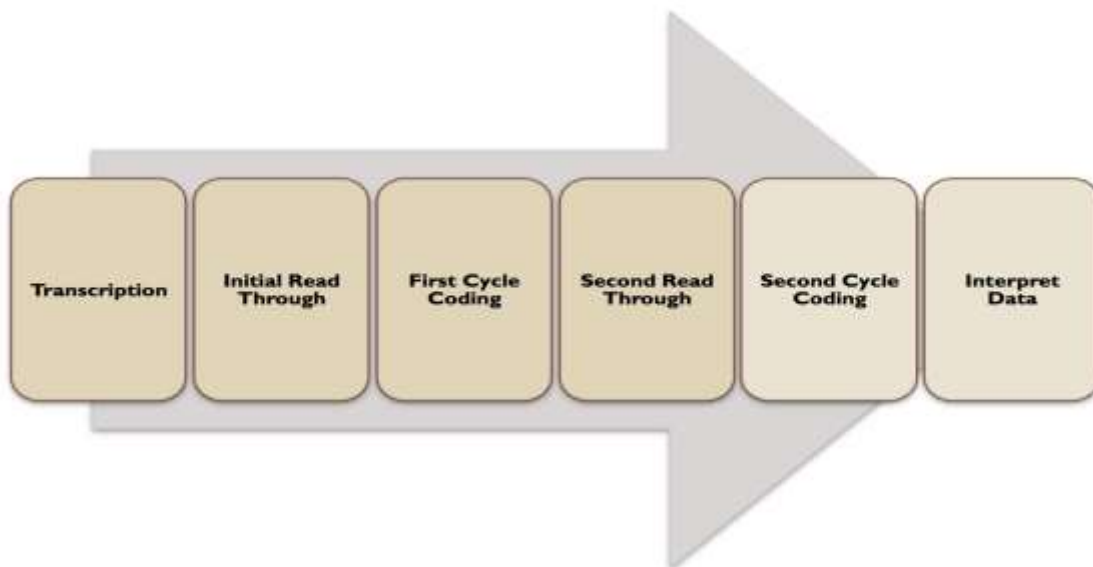


Figure 2: Data Analysis

### **Coding Procedures**

In order to familiarize myself with the data, I conducted all interviews, transcribed all documents, and did all the coding. Prior to beginning the coding process all audio recordings were transliterated into raw and verbatim transcripts. In order to make sense of

the transcripts Patton (2002) suggests, “developing some manageable classification or coding scheme” (p. 463). After audio recordings had been transcribed verbatim I read through each individual transcript and highlighted areas that stood out to me in accordance to the research questions. After the initial run through, all transcripts were uploaded to Atlas.ti in order to begin the coding process. Once all documents had been uploaded to Atlas.ti another read through of each transcript was conducted. Saldaña (2013) asserts “qualitative codes are essence-capturing and essential elements of the research story that, when clustered together according to similarity and regularity- a pattern- they actively facilitate the development of categories and thus analysis of their connections” (p. 8). He suggests two cycles of coding methods in analyzing qualitative data. As such, I implemented both cycles in data analysis.

First cycle coding methods consisted of elemental methods, which includes initial coding, descriptive codes, and in vivo codes. “Elemental coding methods are primarily approaches to qualitative data analysis. They have basic but focused filters for reviewing the corpus and they build a foundation for future coding cycles” (Saldaña, 2013, p. 66). All three different coding methods were utilized in this first cycle of coding. First, in vivo codes “refer to a word or short phrase from the actual language found in the qualitative data record... it is one way of extracting indigenous terms” (Saldaña, 2013, p. 74) from participants in their own words. In vivo coding helps the researcher attune to participant experiences, perspectives, and language. Second, descriptive coding “summarizes in a word or short phrase – most often as a noun – the basic topic of a passage of qualitative data” (Saldaña, p. 70). Third, initial coding “is breaking down qualitative data into

discrete parts, closely examining them, and comparing them for similarities and differences (p. 81). They tend to be first impressions and phrases that arise from an initial read through of the data. A thorough read-through of each transcript helped me identify fifty-three initial codes (see Appendix I: Initial Code List and Descriptions) across all transcripts.

Second cycle coding was conducted in order “develop a sense of categorical, thematic, conceptual, and/or theoretical organizations from [an] array of First Cycle codes” (Saldaña, 2013, p. 149). Second cycle coding consisted of re-reading the transcripts and making mental notes of where codes could be collapsed into themes. Finally, a last read-through of the data dealt with the integration of the original codes into themes (Saldaña). Codes were then codified to consolidate meaning and explanation. Thus, the original 53 codes (Appendix I: Initial Coding List and Descriptions) were recoded into 7 major naturally occurring themes (Appendix J: Second Round Coding).

### **Validity**

Creswell (2009) suggests validity does not carry the same connotation in a qualitative study than it does in quantitative research. Qualitative validity “means that the researcher checks for the accuracy of the findings by employing certain procedures while qualitative reliability indicates that the researcher’s approach is consistent across different researchers and different projects” (p. 190). As such, in order to assure reliability of the procedures the following steps were effected: checked transcripts to make sure there were no obvious mistakes and to assure there was no drift in the definition of codes. In addition, a colleague was asked to cross-check the coding process employed.

Finally, in order to assure validity some of the eight validity strategies recommended by Creswell (2009) were actively incorporated: triangulation, member checking, rich thick descriptions, clarification of bias, presented negative or discrepant information, spent prolonged time in the field, used peer debrief, and used an external auditor. Since participants from the pilot study were asked to return for a second round of interviews (Appendix K: Second Round Interview Questions) and a focus group (Appendix H: Focus Group Questions), participant-interviewer trustworthiness was easier to establish. My dissertation-writing partner helped with the member check process. At the end of each data collection day, I shared my thoughts, journal entries, and overall impressions of the data collection. The process was used to mitigate any type of interviewer bias that may have been introduced. In addition, interview transcripts, drafts, and final reports were also shared to assure there were no obvious errors or biases.

### **Limitations**

Study findings are not generalizable to the entire AfroLatina/o population residing in the United States. The small sample (n= 12) and geographic location provide a limited perspective of AfroLatina/o students' experiences on a college campus. Provided one of the primary purposes of the study is to understand AfroLatina/o identity development and cultural affinity – a process too complexity that cannot be fully captured in a single study – delivers a serious limitation. However, the interview questions were designed to help the participants think deeper about the intersection of identities and how they have impacted, or informed, their experiences on campus. Patton (2002) suggests “interview data limitations include possibly distorted responses due to personal bias, anger, anxiety,

politics, and simple lack of awareness since interviews can be greatly affected by the interviewee at the time of the interview” (p. 306). The interviewee could also be affected by their perception of the interviewer, reactivity of the interviewer, and self-serving responses. Provided that I had no relationship with the campus or the students, their responses could possibly have been more filtered. Finally, my identity as a *mestiza* woman, who was asking questions about colorism, could have caused their responses to be less candid.

Another limitation could be the sampling strategy employed and the recruitment procedures conducted. There may be other AfroLatina/o students who could have qualified for the study but the recruitment emails and fliers bypassed their attention. Maybe they did not identify as AfroLatina/os even though that term was only utilized as an umbrella term. Finally, although Census data indicated the Bronx, NY had the largest concentration of AfroLatina/os in the United States, they may not have been enrolled at Schomburg College.

## **Chapter 4: Participant Vignettes**

The process of identity development is dynamic, complex, and extremely personal. This chapter provides participant vignettes in order to better demonstrate the complexity and dynamism of identity development and how they navigate group acceptance. Vignettes provide verbal illustrations of the complexity and dynamism of what it means to be AfroLatina/o within a highly racialized society. “A qualitative vignette does not need to indicate how common the happening is, although the researcher may take steps to find its typicality” (Stake, 2010, p. 172). Thus, the use of vignettes in this study is intended to illuminate study findings and introduce study participants not to compare individual experiences. The vignettes demonstrate similarities between the participants but also underscore unique differences. Consequently, it demonstrates the uniqueness of participants and the coping mechanism they adopted to withstand prejudiced treatment.

Vignettes are presented for each of the twelve participants (see Table 4.1 Participant Demographics & Table 4.2 Participant Characteristics as a Percentage), including glimpses into their personal journeys and experiences of being an AfroLatina/os in the United States. Each vignette demonstrates the intricacies that arise when they are forced to adopt U. S. homogenous racial and ethnic categorizations. A brief introduction of each participant was created with information gathered from the demographic questionnaires as well as information provided through the interviews. The vignettes consist of a brief introduction to each student followed by a self-styled narrative (Miller, 2015). The narratives provide context into their lived experiences, the

embodiment of their skin color, cultural negotiations, physical characteristics, peer interactions on campus, and their racialized experiences within a highly prejudiced society.

Original transcripts have been edited and shortened to form each vignette. In some cases, the sequences of events have been slightly altered in order to better convey their personal stories. I purposefully kept the transcripts “messy” in order to demonstrate the complexity of their experiences and to allow space for their voices to be heard unedited and uncut. Identity development is complicated and those complexities are captured through their own struggle in expressing their feelings and retelling their stories. All participants were emailed their vignettes and given the opportunity to modify and provide feedback. This process helped with member checking and assuring the vignettes captured their distinctive experiences. Only 6 of the 12 participants provided feedback and/or edited their vignettes. All identifying details have been modified in order to protect the identity of the participant. The vignettes are presented in alphabetical order by participant’s pseudonyms. Finally, each vignette is preceded by a direct quote, which I felt captured, a distinct characteristic of each participant.

**A**

***“I know I’m AfroLatino but I don’t know how others will look at me. That is why I don’t define myself as being Black...”***

A, 34, is a business major who was born in the United States to a light skinned Ecuadorian father and a dark skinned Puerto Rican mother. He grew up in Miami, Florida where he was denied access to the Black group by his peers because of his light skin. His

father's side of the family constantly communicated to him the benefits associated with being White in the United States. A decides to identify as White because he is able to "pass" and wants to reap the benefits associated with Whiteness. Nonetheless, he acknowledges that he wants to identify as Black but struggles between embracing his Blackness and the social taboos attached with being Black. A moved to the Bronx when he was sixteen years old and suddenly found himself surrounded by many AfroLatina/os. He quickly realized speaking Spanish was very important in order to be accepted into the Latino community. A does not speak Spanish but has taken two years of Spanish at Schomburg College. However, being a light skinned Latino was not enough for him to gain group membership he lacked the language.

Participating in the study was very important for him because he wanted to redeem himself for denying his Black identity. A had been formerly incarcerated, noticed that the grand majority of inmates were people of color. He began to read about social inequalities and race in the United States. He quickly realized that although he does not physically present Black his genetic makeup certainly has Black ancestry – and he has the obligation to acknowledge that aspect of his lineage. A is still sorting through the feelings associated with identifying as Black, dispelling stereotypes perpetrated in the Latino community about Blackness, and rejecting notions of Whiteness instilled by his family. His father and uncle consistently tell him to truncate his last name when applying to jobs because employers will assume he is Anglo and offer him a job. In addition, the rejection he has encountered from the Black community has left him perplexed as to how identify.



**In A's words.** [For my race] I go with White although I do have Black. I guess there is my ancestors, my grandparents parents who were of African descent but I don't really identify with them as far as like my culture, skin color, and features. I know I don't look Black and saying that I am will put me in a weird place. I know I'm AfroLatino but I don't know how others will look at me. That is why I don't define myself as being Black and also a big part of it has to do with me being raised where I was raised [United States]. In Miami when I was younger, my peers the African-Americans, specifically didn't identify me as Black or Spanish either. You were Black or you are White so they identified me as White. So that kind of just stuck on and living in New York it's much different. It is difficult even as I talk about it. I am like damn why do I identify as White when I am actually a combination of Black, White, and Indian? So it is difficult because I know that part of how I identify myself has to do with how it impacts me socially and sometimes economically. I don't want to be discriminated against so it is much more comfortable to identify as White and so it is difficult to deal with that.

It's like I am giving up a part of me and I am almost not forced but kind of compelled because out of fear of the consequences or the stigma that is attached to being dark skinned. Which is ridiculous but it's, it's the nature of the beast sort of speak. Many times if you identify as Black, people will just assume that you are lower class that you don't have money. There is a lot of behaviors attached to that and so that is also something that it is difficult to deal with. Not identifying as that stigma forces me to go totally against it and pretty much kind of settling for the lesser of the evils almost. [Saying I am] Afro is almost as me identify as Black. Diego Calderon is a reggaeton artist and he identifies himself as a Black-Latino and I think that, that is very admirable and I actually admire him for doing that because I know what he is doing. I get the point and in Puerto Rico it catches on but out here it's like it doesn't really catch on because even if we are dark skinned, and then we go to Puerto Rico they still call us gringos... because we don't speak the same type of Spanish like Puerto Ricans do from Puerto Rico. It's like that and then I am also half Ecuadorian not just Puerto Rican but also being half Ecuadorian also plays a difference. We are more Indian-Latino.

I think I have some type of recognition, distinction between AfroLatino and Latino and what that means. I think having them be understood would have them feel more comfortable and feel like, ok I have a place where I can be understood at and feel more comfortable, feel that there is a place I could go to if I need something. More of a presence of, an acknowledgment of being AfroLatino because we don't use that term enough I think that if it was used more, I think people would want to identify. I think that if they knew what it was or that it even means something that significant, that it's something worth standing by, then I think ok, this makes sense let me identify as AfroLatino or yes that's what I have

been this whole time. But I never thought about it in that way and it opens up a whole different world of like, ok that is me now. Is this why people look at me a certain way? Or, why people don't interact with me? Or, I don't hang out with certain people so I think it opens up a whole different world to understand themselves and how that impacts my education and me academically. A lot of how it impacts people academically, I think, is what happens at home and what is going on. When I am studying for example, I am thinking about my family. I am not just thinking about studying you can only study for so long without your mind drifting. My life, my family, my family in Puerto Rico, and my family in Ecuador and all of that impacts my identity, and my identity impacts all of that. So, I think that if they [college administrators and professors] can feel comfortable knowing that people know me and support me in understanding how I self-identify, and what that means, and how it's going to impact me academically and beyond.

[To be considered Latino] I think there is a level of authenticity. The darker skinned that I am the more authentic Latino. The darker I am the more Latino I am to the people that it really matters to and especially if my Spanish is really great then I am considered even more authentic. It gets to the point where you are too dark to be Spanish looking and you just look Black, like African Black then now it's like wait a minute, this guy is way too dark he has too much Black in him he is not really an authentic Latino. I think a lot of people see it that way. I think Puerto Ricans want to preserve the triad between the European, Indian, and Black. They want to keep that, they want to preserve that identity of a mixture as opposed to being too much on the dark side.

## **Angelo**

***“There is no sense of African identity growing up. The only sense of African identity I had was in a negative form meaning insults or remarks from family members.”***

Angelo, 30, sociology major was born and raised in the United States. His parents are both from the Dominican Republic and have instilled in him the cultural values of the island. He expressed a sort of turpitude when identifying as Hispanic because he knows that many people reject the term. Nonetheless, Angelo feels the adoption of the term Hispanic as one of his identities is in accordance to the condition of Latina/os in the United States: new, different, and born of chaos and pain. Angelo is constantly searching for knowledge. As a spoken word artistic his vocabulary is very extensive in English but

limited in Spanish. His work is inspired by his own story. He is a dark skinned man with prominent African features. He is often disregarded as a Latino due to his physical appearance. Despite being teased as a child by family members and friends due to his dark complexion, Angelo embraces his Latino identity and has devoted himself to learning about what features, histories, cultures, and races intersected to create him.

The conversations that he has with his children regarding race are different than the ones he had as a child. His children are lighter skinned and second-generation U. S. born. He feels the U. S. influence on his children will be greater on them and because they are lighter skinned, they will not encounter the same prejudices he did as a child. Angelo's family perceives him as an American but he does not want to be seen as a Black-American by others (Angelo rejects the term African American). Despite being a non-traditionally aged student, Angelo is very involved on campus. He began the first chess club on campus and is very involved in student government. Overall, he wants to be seen as an individual before he is categorized in accordance with his skin color. The combination of his physical appearance, skin color, and hair texture amounted to a turbulent childhood, which has carried out to adulthood. He is constantly being questioned if he really is Dominican and tested on his Spanish proficiency. Although he does speak Spanish at home and with friends, he feels self conscious about it because it is U. S. Dominican Spanish – which he classified as almost a dialect. There in lies another distinction between U. S. born Dominicans and those born on the Island. When he visits the Dominican Republic he is automatically categorized as a “gringo” even though he is Black.

**In Angelo's words.** I've read a lot and I take a cultural anthropologist view of things. I don't have the same concept of race than most of [U.S.] society. I look at it globally. Race is not defined as just Black, White, and Asian. I look at race as a distribution, distributed within the cline, like a rainbow, like one goes and blends into the next one. You don't have a direct delimitation between races you have in-betweens. Even though I was born in the U.S. I identify as Dominican because that is where my entire family is from and I don't believe American is a race. I have always identified as Dominican I never thought I was less of a Dominican because of my [dark] skin color or because I couldn't speak Spanish as fluently. I have always known I am Dominican. My family is Dominican my family is pure Dominican. Everybody is Dominican and they are as Dominicans as it gets. On top of that my fathers side of the family are of the darker Dominicans. I knew I had seen it [growing up] but I wasn't around them very much. It did hurt me a little bit as far as my identity as an AfroLatino. I knew they existed so that wasn't a problem.

There is no sense of African identity growing up. The only sense of African identity I had was in a negative form meaning insults or remarks from family members. That's when I knew I was Black. My cousins and others would be like, like "don't jump in the pool with your hair," little jokes like that, jokes like *negrito*. They were little, little, things. Then you internalize it but that is the only thing about Blackness that you know. I think that it makes it harder. It definitely makes it harder that within your own family you have to go through that. My father is the darkest one in the family but he will have more Black jokes. My father is the darker one but his hair is straight. So he will have the hair jokes. It is very complicated. There is a joke that the darker you are the more racist you are. I have heard that in Columbia and I have heard that in the Dominican Republic. Those communities are more mix or have more African in them. They are also more racist than let's say the upper-class places in Bogota. I guess it comes consciously because you want to separate yourself, you want to separate yourself from the ugly, so you kinda are the one that points the finger. A mulatto is more racist than a White Hispanic person and I think that is where it [gets perpetrated]. You will get it from both sides the discrimination from White skinned Hispanics but you also get it from more mulatto people because they have enough to separate you, who may be darker than maybe them, so people always have somebody under them I think it is that complex.

I have always identified as Dominican but embracing it is a different story. That took me being like 21-22 years old when I started reading more. I finally understood it and I didn't think about it until this moment but it probably happened when I started reading more. I feel Dominican falls within the umbrella of being Hispanic. Within that the history of slavery, the history of African descent, within that the history of European descent, within that the history of

Indigenous people, and all of us have different degrees of those three. It's not just because I am Dominican or because someone is Mexican it's really part of your family and your history. It's part of your grandmother who did your grandmother marry? Was she light skinned? Was he dark skinned? Was he originally from that country? All of that plays into how our family looks so I think it is way more complicated than I am Black or my grandmother is white. Am I supposed to not include her in my Blackness since she is White? Just all of that, it never made any sense. You are what you are and being Dominican and being Mexican you have the Indigenous bloodline in there. You have the European bloodline in there and anything else that may have come along for any reason. You have that in there, I don't think it's important to say I am one more than the other.

Growing up I had a crush on Xucha [Brazilian pop artist] that was a typical person I liked you know, the *rubia* blue-eyed and blond hair. I didn't know any better I am talking about four or five years old. I didn't know any better but as I got older. I start to realize there was a reason why I gravitated towards that [standard of beauty]. I was told that was epitome of beauty. That was subconscious you are four or five years old you don't think that you just go by what you see on TV or what people talk about in your life. As I grew older I learned to pick my own brain. I learned that it was intentional because they want you to feel and think that Black is ugly. That Brown is ugly. I can find beauty in everyone. I know that sounds corny but it is true it is different. [However] everybody cannot be beautiful based on European standards and that's not right. [I've learned] that people use your level of Africaness that shows up in your appearance to define your Blackness. Phenotype and genotype are two different things we talk about anthropology or scientific anthropology. The way you come out, the way your genes express themselves is just a toss of the dice. President Barack Obama is a perfect example, his mother is White but he is Black in this country no matter how much he looks like his mother. That to me is insane. He is obviously his mother's child but we are so caught up on phenotype that we ignored what to me is obvious. If you ignore skin color, you will see his mother's face. We are so caught up on phenotype the black skin, the nose, the hair, that we ignore the obvious things.

In college I haven't really learn anything I mean I had one class that taught me how to write properly. I have always know how to write but she taught me how to write structurally. I didn't learn anything other than how to conduct research, which has been the most important thing I've been taught. As far as leadership [on campus] I saw an opening, when I was a kid I learned how to play chess and I would play in tournaments as a kid. I don't play that much as an adult but anyway I just didn't want to go to school here and go home. I figure I am an older student I am 30 years old, I am not 22 anymore but in my decision to go back to college it wasn't mainly just to get a degree, that was the primary goal but

also I also knew that this was a limited space and time that I had the ability to do things that I did not have a chance to do before. Things that I probably should've done in my early 20s but I didn't have a chance to do because I was working or doing other stuff. I said, "what niche can I find? What don't they have? They don't have a chess club, perfect!" I started the chess club it is my small way of trying to leave a legacy.

## **Cristhian**

***"It's a dichotomy for me living here in the U.S. Yes, your race is what they see you as, your race is what you really are. I really never understood Blackness being an ethnicity."***

Cristhian, 20, music major was born in the Dominican Republic and immigrated to Manhattan when he was 17 years old with his mother, brother, and aunt. He is the first in his family to attend college and has been relatively successful navigating social, cultural, and linguistic barriers on campus. His native language is Spanish but masters English and despite having a modest accent is a verbalist. He self-identifies as Dominican of African descent but feels that others may categorize him as being Black, mixed, or Japanese-Black. Although most would consider him a "light skinned Black," he has endured mockery, in the forms of name-calling and jokes by family members due to his dark(er) skin. Cristhian explained that his younger brother is "light skinned with good hair" and because he is able to "pass" he self-identifies as mixed or mulatto. Cristhian is well aware of the social benefits that are associated with Whiteness but rejects the assumption that Blackness is to be escaped. His panethnic identity heavily influences how he views race, ethnicity, and culture in the United States.

Throughout his participation in the study, Cristhian made it clear that he was not a Dominican-American but rather a Dominican from the island. In his perspective, U. S.

born AfroDominicans are a hybrid between African-American's and Dominicans. The social-cultural realities of each country have continued to mold how he sees himself. On campus his friends are mostly international students or recent immigrants. Although he is very proud of being Black, he does not see himself reflected in the experiences of African-American's. Cristhian is on a constant search for more information that will help him conceptualize what it means to be AfroLatino in the United States.

**In Cristhians's words.** I guess from middle school and high school I called myself a mulatto because of my father side of the family. They come from part of the Island [Dominican Republic] where they are more lighter and White and when I came here I was like you know what I kind of look more Black than anything else. So I circled just Black and then Afro Latino and then Black-Dominican and then I got all confused and was like no (laughs)... and then I was like Dominican of African descent and then I was like OK Afro Latino. Afro Latino it is then. I do not know, I feel if I claim, only Black then they will see me you know as only African-American in this country [United States] and then sometimes I have nothing to do with them. When people make ignorant jokes about fried chicken or watermelon it was like all out of the blue. Other than being Black, I have nothing in common.

When I came from DR, it was eye opening. That is when it finally hit me: who you are and what you look like matters. I was so blind when I was in DR I guess all of my friends were too. I mean it is against the law to classify people by race so I guess when they do Census and stuff they never ask you are you Caucasian or are you of African descent? You are Dominican and that is it! You check that. That is how it was when I was in school and I guess lately most Dominicans are you know being proud of who they are. I guess in DR you could be... be proud of being Black but you cannot be all out. It is like ok, I know you are proud but just keep it on the down low. Therefore, when I was in school... with my friends with their curly hair and all the stuff they used to straighten their hair and if you had hair like me that is kinky, you usually cut it off (laughs). I was bullied in middle school and during my freshman and sophomore year in high school. My classmates used to call my hair *pimiento or canela*, means it is like kinky hair. It is annoying, but you have to launch it off.

Two of my friends who seemed White, or at least could pass as one. However, their grandparents were Black I did not know until I went to one of their houses and I met his grandparents and they were as Black as, I do not know,

the night. My brother, he is lighter and has lighter eyes and people assume he is mixed. That is the same thing with two of my first cousins. They are light, but that is just their phenotype. They still have African ancestry. There is this other cousin, he was born and reared here. He is the darkest in the family. I guess he feels awkward being with us in family gatherings because of race-related jokes. No one makes fun of him but those jokes, those comments of: 'oh you are Haitian'. Like if, you are called "Haitian" it is an insult.

[In the United States] sometimes I want to be just Black and then be like Black and proud and power to the people, but I do not identify with that type of movement. I have always been like I feel that it is my duty as a Black person to identify as such but if you do not identify as Black people in the African-American community see you, as I do not know, a sell-out. I guess many of the times when I say Afro Latino my African-American friends are like, oh but you were trying to be like Black and something else, you were trying to be mixed or whatever. You should be proud of who you are. At home, I have my family who identify as Black, but not African American per se. We are a different type of Blacks (they say). Some stereotypes attributed to Blacks here in the U.S. like Blacks obsession with fried chicken and purple drink or all black people can sing and dance, etc. were not part of my life in DR, so I had to deal with this level of ignorance back there (D.R.) There's also Ebonics, which is only part of the "African American experience". I got a friend he is from India he was raised here since he was 12 or something. He told me: you are Dominican but I see you as different because you do not go to parties all the time, and you do not drink alcohol all the time, and you are funny but you are not like over-the-top as Dominicans are. Later I visited Washington Heights (the Dominican enclave in NYC) and they are sort of like that and I get it why people call us that; not everyone behaves this way, but bad things tend to stand out easier and faster. Most Dominicans here come from the Northern provinces, so no wonder I find them so different from me. Even our accent and idioms are different.

## **Damian**

***"Being a Latino [in the U.S.] you almost, like you can't really call yourself Black because African-Americans have their own history that is separate."***

Damian, 22, history major was born and raised in the Bronx. He is the son of Dominican immigrants and was raised in a very traditional home. Although he was born in the U. S. he speaks about himself as if he were born in the Dominican Republic. At home they only speak Spanish and their culture is fully Dominican. Nonetheless, Damian



identifies culturally as Caribbean-Black largely due to the group of friends he grew up with and his friends at school. However, he notes his identity changes and fluctuated depending on where he is at and what he is doing. Growing up in the Bronx exposed him to a wealth of cultural, ethnic, and linguistic diversity. He understands Blackness is larger than the color of one's skin but rather the amalgamation of social, cultural, and historical factors. As such, he is wary of identifying as African-American. He knows being African-American in the United States denotes a historical factor filled with pain, suffering, and ancestry denied (due to slavery).

Reading and learning about the conquest in the Dominican Republic and the contributions of AfroLatinos has helped him understand what it means to be Afro, Latino, and the combination of the two. Damian views AfroLatina/os as the gateway to uniting African-Americans and Latina/os in the United States. He believes educational institutions should take more of a proactive approach by incorporating the histories of AfroLatina/os into courses being taught. He also notes the clear division between African-Americans and Latina/os on campus and attempts to bridge it through forming knowledge circles that highlight such issues.

**In Damian's words.** I think growing up in the Bronx, people will make that assumption of yes it's a melting pot or whatever but it's just a whole different collective of cultures. New York is different than other states. It's like they have pockets of Latino communities. I didn't really grow up in one of them, it was really more like with Black Caribbean's that I grew up around. So, I think that it further cemented that I was Black. It became something that I couldn't really separate myself from. I grew up around so many different cultures. I grew up in a small Jamaican community and my best friends were from Trinidad and Jamaica. A lot of values that I have stem from my experience growing up there. I think it was more than a teaching experience it was like I learned this sense of identity. I was Latino and one of the very few where I lived. The school that I went to in

middle school, it just made it harder to find other people like me and easier to connect with people that were Black because that is all that was around me at that time. So growing up you know a lot of my friends were Black, a lot of them. So I think that because of the neighborhood where I grew up and those experiences that definitely affected the way I saw not only my identity but other people. So, yeah culturally I might identify with the Caribbean culture but a lot of parts from the Caribbean so I feel you know, depending on the day more than anything else (laughs) is how I will identify. [Racially] I identify as AfroLatino or Black Latino and the reason I do this is because of the history of the Dominican Republic, my parents are from there. So, that in itself has a lot of African influence and a mix of cultures that I can't really deny. This [the Dominican Republic] is where I am coming from.

A lot of Latinos identify as Black but a lot don't identify. Historically, it's in their blood it's in their culture. I think it gives it the sense of (long pause)... I want to say self-hatred. Latinos have a big, big, culture of being racist and I was like how could I do it? You know, it didn't make sense. It didn't apply because of how I grew up because of who my friends were. I think that it definitely did change a lot for me. Looking back at it now where would I be without that? That definitely affected me, I guess the way I came up in the Bronx and even here at Schomburg College. I think there is just so much information people don't know and they [educators] don't provide this information. Like information we should have known, many of us should have known I think and it just comes to late and I feel that even today, even today, I am learning stuff about myself and where I come from. My identity has changed over time and I have to self-identify and recheck that everyday. Everyday it's adding on, it's still being built because it's not clear because the information is not there. In this sense the information I was mentioning, or lack of, is the lack of emphasis on conversations about colonization. You know, slaves were brought over and that is key to understanding that yes, before them there were people there. They were Indigenous people but they were wiped out. That kind of mixing in with the European in itself, in an instant made the culture where we are from [Latin America]. It was kind of born out of that violence and out of that pain. That is where we get where we are from and who we are. I think none of that information is ever given. It's kinda like yeah we as people just paraded together, like they didn't care about race. It was so important back in the day it was so important like it is today.

Being a Latino [in the U.S.] you almost, like you can't really call yourself Black because African-Americans have their own history that is separate. You have to understand it, there is a separation and you can't claim something that is not necessarily yours. It's like saying yes, we are all Black yeah that diaspora aspect is there but not the history. I think for Latinos it's like you know I was born

here and I feel like I should have claim to some of that history because I have grown up here. Everything that I have is here and the reality is that it's not. A lot of AfroLatinos grow up with their parents culture and you know where that came from, the Islands or whatever or South America. I think it does it, gives you this sense of having to re-identify. Am I Latino am I Black or something else? How does each of those come together?

I think [Latinos] have to challenge racism. Challenge it because that in itself, the institution of racism, will separate us [Black Americans and Latinos] and that has to be something that Latinos have to endure. Especially for the younger generations but I think because of the fact that they grew up with the older generations' view of racism, they are expecting two different outlooks and different values. The fact that they grew up here and had to live between the two cultures make it difficult. There is a problem with that in general but you know the Black community needs to understand that language is a barrier but you know that has to be accepted. We can't be forced to be learning different languages just to catch up. I am not saying people have to learn Spanish but it is the second biggest language and is counterpoise to be the first so I think that it has a lot of implications. We just need to start coming together and see where we are and become united and learn. I have the experience in both languages it just I kinda prefer Spanish but I've been speaking English my whole life. English could be this drawled out... English, I don't know why it makes you feel sad, I don't know why, I it's so weird. It's so weird. It's so weird (laughs). you could never get to a definitive solution with English like Spanish everything is clear cut you know it's descriptive.

I think there's really like a split because of the fact of being lost. [AfroLatinos] have to choose between A or B and not knowing or recognizing that A and B could be AB or BA. I think that's what makes it [unity] so difficult, you are like no I am Latino in these aspects and I am of African descent in these other aspects it's that information is not fair. Once people start to look towards unity, people are like we are not too far from there in the sense that we are going to come together. We need to start looking at examples where it has worked like in Cuba there is definitely AfroLatino people and AfroLatino culture that is alive and thrives. We need to looking at examples where it has worked rather than just keeping the differences. We need to keep hammering down not all Latinos are racist and Blacks are from the U.S. We need to just talk about how we are better together and the fact is that AfroLatinos in particular play a central role because of the fact that they can literally say they are both. I think that they have a larger we have a larger role in that sense because of our particular history in the U.S. and [Latin American] countries.

## David

*“I try not to identify racially because, how do you define that you are genetically a mutt?”*

David, 48, English major was born and raised in the Bronx to Dominican immigrant parents. Since he was the first in his family to be born in the United States, his family always referred to him as “*el Americano*,” the first American. They made sure to remind him there was a clear distinction between him and the rest of his family members. He grew up in a household that was culturally Dominican, where only Spanish was spoken, but at school and in society he was flooded with U. S. culture and English-only. David went through a period of cultural turmoil he was trying to define his cultural identity while attempting to understand who he was racially, ethnically, and culturally. He eventually decided culturally he was Dominican but his real authentic identity was that of a Bronxite. American to him has no particular definition since those living in South and Central America are also Americans.

Although he identifies culturally as Dominican, he rejects any and all stereotypes associated with being *Dominicano*. He believes there is so much more to being Dominican than being a baseball player and all the other stereotypes (good or bad). As a non-traditionally aged student, David has a unique perspective on being an AfroLatino student on campus. He is seen as a mentor by many of his younger peers and prides himself in producing high quality work. He feels professors hold students of color to a lesser standard because of their race – specifically Latina/o students. David noted the clear appropriation of American culture by Whites and that appropriation extends into the

classroom. In particular, he believes educational curriculums will continue to be divisive until we stop creating separate categories for people of color. He does not understand why there needs to be an adjective before “American” when referring to non-Whites. For example, he asked, “why are African American play writes not called American?” He demands for dramatic change to take place in the classroom in order for colleges to rightfully call themselves teaching institutions. Overall, David’s panethnic identity coupled with his lived experiences provides him with a unique perspective.

**In David’s words.** Ethnically I identify with my parents heritage and their nationality. My parents are Dominican and I feel that I derive from their culture. I think that identifying yourself as an American doesn’t have any one particular definition. I believe that it is still constantly evolving because of the gathering of different people, of different backgrounds, ethnically, culturally, and religious so that particular identification is still evolving as an American. I have a really, really, really difficult time identifying racially. I think that we are all made up of different components like my mothers side of the family is dark skinned, very dark skinned, and by that I mean my mother’s father was Taino. You know Indigenous Taino to the Dominican Republic. My grandmother, she had a much darker complexion and she had more of the African facial features as opposed to my grandfather who had more of the Taino facial features. On my father side of the family, it is mixed of Taino and it is also mixed with European Spanish. With all of those racial mixtures, I know I have Euro-Spanish in me. I have Indigenous Taino and I have African Yorumba, which is in my physical genetic makeup. So racially, I don’t really identify. I try not to identify racially because, how do you define that you are genetically a mutt?

I think many people don't realize that regardless of where they physically originate from, wherever it is that they are born, there is much more to their physical, genetic, and racial make up. They derive from their parents, their grandparents, and their great grandparents. Somebody may see themselves as Dominican but what type of Dominican? You know what component of you would you say makes you Dominican? It’s hard to say I am just one thing but I would say that culturally, first and foremost, I always identify as a Bronxite. I was born here in the Bronx. Second, I say I am a New Yorker. I am very proud of being a New Yorker, then I identify as an American. Then I put out my national identity and then I put out what I think is my cultural and ethnic identity. My identification has evolved over time. As a child I saw myself as a Dominican

because my father and my mother are Dominican you know so I am what my parents are. Along the way there was a little bit of embarrassment or detachment from the rest of my environment because I wasn't seeing myself as an American or part of the American culture.

In [retrospect] I realize that if you identify yourself as anything other than what the masses are, I think that sometimes, you consider yourself deficient or different than anybody else. You begin to identify differently and that is part of what I was leading towards because you know seeing myself as I am what my parents are, I saw myself as Dominican but not understanding what that was. In a way it was almost like living in exile. The only place I spoke Spanish was at home with my parents. At school and in society Carlos becomes Charles and Carlota becomes Charlotte, and for me I had to go from David to Dave. Nobody calls me Dave. Who the hell is Dave? Dave is the American version of my name, so now you have to be Dave. Our names are Americanized, our speech becomes Americanized, I think that it is institutionalized for you to forget about who you were and to easily accept what you are becoming [an American].

In this country people went from being colored, to being Black, to being AfroAmerican, to being African-American. What about [AfroLatinos]? Where are we? Overtime we start off with one standard of who we are and that changes little by little over time. For me I will always identify in that way because that uniquely defines who I am, you know, I am a Hispanic person of African descent. I think that if there is a true and authentic identification of myself the word Afro should be somewhere. One of the things that gets lost is the infusion of language in [U.S.] culture. I comment to people all the time, I say there was never a word for taco in English, that word was introduced to the English language through Spanish culture. When you go to Taco Bell and you order a burrito, what is a burrito? The language has taken on different meaning in American culture. When we as Hispanics see that our language is affecting [U.S.] culture, it makes us more accepting of the new culture.

In the Dominican Republic you never hear about slavery, they never talk about it. They never talk about how Blacks were brought from Africa as slaves and deposited throughout the Caribbean. Slavery is never really talked about. I think that they tend to think about the idea of post-colonization as opposed to acknowledging that slavery existed. Here in the United States the conversation of slavery is much more prevalent because it is viewed as a greater atrocity. Freedom is supposed to be here. Everything is supposed to be about freedom but when you travel to all these Caribbean Islands, the whole idea of it being colonized and populated with African slaves as a labor force is something that doesn't get talked about. There is a whole negative connotation that comes about when you admit that you are a descendent of slaves in any way shape or form. It signifies

weakness that one race was conquered over another, and if you derive from that then there is something inherently weak about you. That is probably why people [Latinos] don't want to identify with that part of their historical genetic makeup.

There are many differences between the U.S. and DR. In the Dominican Republic money is always a primary factor on how people are perceived. If you are dark skin and you have money, the money will provide you a status whereas here in the United States, there is always a greater racial component because of the greater presence of Anglo personalities. If you go to the Dominican Republic there really is no direct racism it is more like classism. It doesn't matter if you are dark skinned or light skinned the only thing that matters is how well off you are financially.

## **Destiny**

***“I accept who I am even though the histories of Africans are so complicated.”***

Destiny, 22, pre-health major was born and raised in the Bronx. Both of her parents are from the Dominican Republic but her father left when she was only nine years old. Her father was a “very dark skinned Dominican” and her mother “light skinned.” Destiny is medium-dark skinned and has prominent African features. Growing up, her mother consistently expressed her dislike of the African-American community and attached negative stereotypes to Blackness. Destiny grew up believing that being Black was undesirable, her mother's attempt at Whitening her included relaxing her hair, sending her to Catholic school in order to prevent her from interacting with “hoodlums,” and constant messaging about rejecting anything Black.

When Destiny was in high school she began to identify as mixed race or biracial because she knew she was “more than just Latina.” Despite her mother's desires to reject her Blackness, Destiny became curious about her genetic makeup and their manifestation through her physical features. She took a DNA test and the results revolutionized her

understanding about whom she was and her ancestral lineage. She became more invested in embracing her Blackness – even though it meant disapproval from her mother. Destiny decided to go natural with her hair and self-identifying as a Black Dominican American.

**In Destiny's words.** When I say I am Dominican a lot of people think it's a race. I identified as biracial but most people don't think there is levels to it but there are so many levels to it. If I am biracial but I am also ethnically Dominican that shouldn't be an issue but some people don't see the difference between that. I have to break it down to make people understand, and that is fine, and if you are willing to just sit down and even look it up on the internet or read some books then you would understand. The reality is some people want to be just willfully ignorant. There is just a certain level of respect so it's like for example, if I tell you my name is Destiny, would you call me a different name without my permission? I feel that is just disrespectful if I tell you I classify as biracial and AfroLatino and AfroDominican, I think that you should just honor and respect it and if you don't understand then do your own research. You know? So yeah, I get some questions of why do you identify as that? I feel that in the heat of like this racial climate and everything that is going on, I feel that it is important for people to know what the differences are and just to embrace who you are and just respect other people's culture. It's hard but I feel more people are becoming more understanding or asking more questions. It's been helping out a lot too. I think it's easier now to classify myself as biracial and AfroLatina at the same time, especially now on a college campus.

I am privileged to be at this place [the city] you get so much knowledge from so many different people in the world that come into one city and just inspire you or show you different parts of the world that you would never see. I am open minded to see and learn those things and I think part of the reason is because I had to grow up kinda assimilating to Black culture and Dominican culture from my mom and my dad, and American culture because I grew up here so it's super complicated but it's interesting and it's fun. It's been hard though. I had a friend who classified me as Black, you are a Black girl, you are a Black girl, that's what she said. So, I laughed about it because there is some truth to that but that's not all that I am. People should respect that and know that there is more to the person than just how they look and their features. It's their culture it's part of who they are if anything, that's the big difference between everyone, it's their culture. I feel Dominican but I have never been to the Dominican Republic. I have picked up the language from my parents who were both born in the Dominican Republic. That's how a lot of us [U.S. born Latinos] keep our heritage and our culture alive, through our parents that came from different countries so it's helped to feel connected but I have also felt left out.



[I've conducted] research on my history. Research on the racial background of the Dominican Republic since both of my parents were born and raised there. I wanted to know why there are so many people that are just different. They have so many different shades and colors and growing up you don't look into it too deep until you get older and people want to label you and put you inside of a box. I don't understand the reason. So you start asking yourself, do you fit into a certain box? Or, what is Dominican because Dominican isn't a race? What is it? I start doing more research and I also did DNA Ancestry and it comes out to be that I am like 60% African and then about 35% European and 4% Native American. It really broke it down the way I wanted. I knew it because I do my own research but it was surprising to know how much European I got. I didn't consider myself to be European or have any European. I knew I had something I just didn't know how much or from where so it was interesting to do that and that is why I consider myself to be biracial.

I grew up with my mom and dad for my first nine years and then I was just raised by my mom. She is conditioned to thinking a certain type of way. She has these perceptions of race and you know she has her share of opinions on African-Americans and Africans. I'm like it's your ancestry you have descendants of that you are African too. It's hard for me to have these conversations [about race] with her because you know her children are all different shades and she's not 100% European. Sometimes you have to have those conversations [about race and prejudice] like with my mom she dropped out in 10<sup>th</sup> grade in high school so it's like the only thing she knows is to work. She's a single mom and she learns from the news, the Spanish news, and [stereotypes are perpetuated through] discussions and debates with her friends. A lot of these women and men don't have a lot of education around these things so they just stick to what they know from when they were young and that was back in the days. They were in the Dominican Republic when Trujillo was a dictator. These things you know, they influenced their childhood. They are condition towards these ideas that it's better to be Eurocentric than Afrocentric. The lighter you are the better. The straighter your hair is the better and it's like it's hard. She had a rude awakening with me because she decided to have kids with someone who was darker and I came in the middle.

I feel like this whole race thing, or just wanting to be more something or the other, I don't understand for me I embrace it. I embrace both sides and I even embrace the 4% Native American, like why not? It's more to connect to more people, to connect to more cultures, to connect to a lot more but some people don't see it. It's taboo to talk about it. Why would you want to be you know connected to one of the most persecuted races in America? I say why not? Like for me if it's what you are, then you should stand up for who you are because you came from that. So she [my mom] doesn't understand that and she is starting to,

slowly through me. I guess me being defiant and just doing what I want to do and give her hope, maybe to see things and change how she sees things. I educate her on these things because you have to you, can't be that ignorant about these things and it's 2015, in New York City, in New York, in this world. It's crazy but I feel like we are getting better like as far as the world. Well there is a lot of racial tensions but these are bringing a bunch of questions like in smaller groups, in smaller settings, and it's good to think about these things.

Another thing that gets me is the whole good versus bad hair. It's horrible. It's like good hair is more manageable and its straight or wavy. Then the bad hair is the really dry, really coiled, like kinky hair. I'm like why does it have to be labeled good or bad? Hair is hair. It's growing out of your head so you have all of these different things coming to impact women. I get more accepted more and more by Caribbean women from Jamaica or Dominica or just different countries. I think they kinda understand that it's an African diaspora. We have different cultures but we still eat some of the same food. There are some of those similarities in culture that we gravitate towards and acceptance. They say well you are from the Caribbean and you have meat on your bones, you are curvy. Stuff like that, it makes you feel comfortable you know it makes me feel comfortable because yeah, I am curvy and yes I do have meat on my bones. I do eat plantains. You know there are certain things that you relate to and it makes you feel comfortable.

I accept who I am even though the histories of Africans are so complicated. Europeans and slavery and you know, I might have descendants of slavery which I'm pretty sure I do, and it's just not an easy history to accept. We have to accept that this is how you got here so I don't know, I just accept myself. It's hard when other people like to label you. I do feel more people are becoming more educated and tolerant of different cultures and the fact that you can have two cultures and be biracial [is a step forward]. I feel you could be both [Black and Latina]. You could be tri-racial. You could be multiracial. That is just how life is people just like to box you in. They are willfully ignorant about it they don't want to know this is just what they know. Their attitude is like this is what I know I don't want to know any better and this is what I'm going to stick to.

## **Lili**

***“I want to speak Spanish in front of people but sometimes I decide not to speak Spanish so I don't feel excluded.”***

Lili, 23, pre-health major was born in the United States to Honduran (Garifuna) immigrant parents. They returned to their native land when Lili was just a little girl. Lili

is of Garifuna descent – a historically Black community in Honduras. When her family returned to Guatemala they did not go back to a Garifuna village, although both of her parents were raised in one, they lived in a largely mestizo city. Lili and her siblings encountered pervasive discrimination and bullying by other Hondurans due to their prominent African features and dark skin. Lili's younger sister, Pao, also participated in this study (her vignette demonstrates how different they are). They both endured discrimination and rejection from their mestizo peers but they identify completely differently. Lili acknowledges she is both Garifuna and Honduran compelling her to adopt the term AfroLatina as an identity. She is very proud of both her African roots and Garifuna ancestry.

When they returned to the United States Lili enrolled at Schomburg College where she encountered a different type of discrimination. Her phenotype was no longer an issue, she found community within the African immigrant group, but when she would speak Spanish they would question her loyalty. In accordance with her quiet personality, she opted to speak as little as possible but felt she belonged with the Latina/o group due to language and culture. Nonetheless, she encountered rejection from both groups. Some Latina/os rejected her because of her skin color while some Africans would reject her because she spoke Spanish. During her entire time at Schomburg College she never met another self-identified AfroLatina/o.

**In Lili's words.** Culturally I identify as a Garifuna and racially I identify either as Black or AfroLatina. I could see a little bit of both because first I used to identify just as Honduran, and then as Garifuna, but then I started hearing this term AfroLatina and I decided to use it because it talks about both sides, my ethnicity and my culture. My ethnicity and culture are both inside that term so I like it. I

decided to identify myself as AfroLatina but not always. AfroLatino is a very wide you know it contains a very wide amount of different people but Garifuna it is more specific to me my family my culture than AfroLatina. When people ask me where I am from, the first thing I say is I am from Honduras and then most of them actually know about my Garifuna culture. They ask if I am Garifuna but if they have never heard of us, I explain I am from Honduras, I have my own language, my own culture, and stuff like that besides other people from Honduras.

When I lived in Honduras, I knew I belong to that culture [Garifuna]. I felt part of that culture but here after a lot of experiences like for example I met a group of people [on campus] and they deny that they have Black roots even though it is clear they do. They say, “no I’m not Black.” Maybe when they say they aren’t Black they are referring to Black, African-Americans but to me it still sounds wrong. I don’t know, it sounds wrong maybe I’m exaggerating but they deny [their Blackness]. *Con personas que yo te he dicho*, even though they have Black traits and stuff like that, they will say no that they are not Black. I really don’t approach them because they discriminate [against Blacks]. Sometimes in the street or at school I will stay quiet and I won’t talk because I don’t want people to view me different because of my accent. They wouldn’t know that I speak Spanish. I don’t want to be rejected. I’ve had experiences when I started speaking Spanish in front of African-American people and I would feel that they would look at me different. You know, different like I don’t belong to the same group. If I am around Latino people, regardless if they are AfroLatino or not, I will start speaking Spanish. Most of them think that I am African because they think I’m from Ghana. They will ask me, where are you from? I will tell them I am from Honduras and I am Garifuna you know, like that and it’s ok because we speak Spanish.

My identity, *se ha hecho mas fuerte aqui por esas experiencias y tambien porque* where I used to live in Honduras, there weren’t a lot of Garifunas or AfroLatinos. The place where I lived there was a lot of mestizo population like here [in the U.S]. Here it is a melting pot but the area [neighborhood] where I live at there are a lot of Garifunas. I will hear them you know, I will go in the street and hear them speak and I will smile because I will be like “oh, they are speaking Garifuna.” It makes me think of my culture and makes me smile. My mom learned Spanish when she was 13 because she grew up in the Garifuna village in Honduras. Nobody used to speak Spanish and now she says people don’t want to speak Garifuna. I remember when I grew up just a few people used to speak Spanish and you will go to other towns and you wouldn’t hear children speaking Spanish just Garifuna. I don’t speak Garifuna because my parents didn’t teach us. They wanted us to not be [bullied and assimilate] to mestizo. *Como yo crecí en Honduras pero yo crecí en una parte donde habíamos pocos negros, mis padres siempre nos inculcaron que nosotros tenemos que estar orgullosos de nuestra*

*cultura. Nosotros tenemos nuestro propio dialecto incluso entonces siempre, siempre nos mantuvieron consientes, “mira que muchas veces no te van a respetar por esto,” entonces uno se tiene, que te tienes que defender y defender a tu raza entonces siempre supe la diferencia being a Garifuna in Honduras.*

In the U.S. *al principio uno llega aquí y like for example, I didn’t speak English. Not a lot of English so yo siempre buscaba Latinos, siempre a buscar Latinos o personas que parecían Latinos. Entonces siempre me iba acercar a ellos para hablar español y que me ayudaran y cosas así. Pero como que siempre al mismo tiempo yo miraba diferencia entre como ellos trataban a la gente y siempre había un grupo. Yo pensé que New York is a melting pot you have everything, everywhere. [However], there is always groups. Groups of people so yo decía si estoy con los Hispanos, pero al mismo tiempo sentía que algunos compañeros Africanos como que se me quedaban viendo. Así como que porque yo siempre estaba con el grupo de Hispanos. Entonces sentía, bueno y ahora que hago? I would try to be friends with them, and then I mean friends with everybody, but I didn’t have a group I didn’t know where to stay. Although I would stay with the language [Spanish group] but no sabía. Alomejor porque, a lot of Afrodescendants [on campus], they deny that part of their culture. They say “oh, no yo no tengo nada que ver,” with that culture even though you see it’s on their skin. I don’t know how they would classify but this really yeah I would say there is a substantial large group on campus but they deny their [Blackness]. Then with the others, you feel a little weird because people look at you entonces es como you speak English and everything is ok, its good. You feel kinda welcome to the group but once you start speaking Spanish, it’s weird because it’s like they say “oh, I thought you were more from us.” Y así como quien dice oh, no tu tienes tu grupito. I feel like a little bit outside when they realize I speak Spanish. That is why sometimes it is weird. Sometimes I want to speak Spanish in front of people but sometimes I decide not to speak Spanish so I don’t feel excluded.*

I identify racially first as Black and then Hispanic but when people ask me where I am from, I immediately say I am from Honduras. Most people will be surprised they will always say “oh, I thought you were from Ghana, I thought you were from Nigeria.” I identify myself with Black first because I’ve learned to take pride of my heritage. *Porque muchas veces uno se siente, oh de lado, por las mismas personas estando alrededor siendo hispanas. Entonces uno escucha muchas veces como se refieren acerca de los negros. Pero yo soy negra también y soy hispana y yo digo yo soy de las dos cosas pero como quien dicen para defender mi orgullo, yo me identifico primero como negra y después Hispanic pero mejor AfroLatina.*

## **Natalia**

***“I have grown to understand that my color is just as much an accident as any of my other physical attributes.”***

Natalia, 22, business major was born in the U. S. to a Trinidadian father and a Colombian mother. Her father was absent from her life but her very supportive mother and grandmother raised her. She grew up in a predominantly African American community in Long Island but never felt excluded. Both her mother and grandmother are of fair complexion but they both identify as Black. Natalia grew up with a very positive self-image and a strong panethnic identity. Her maternal side derives from the Island of Providence off the coast of Colombia, all of the Islands’ inhabitants are Colombians of African descent. When they go to Colombia for vacation, she feels welcomed and free – which she shared is very different than how she feels in the U. S. Natalia enjoys being there and upholds those cultural customs when she is in the United States.

Natalia upholds the identities of intellect and hard work and does not ascribe to traditional ethnic and racial markers. She is an Honors College student but notes she is the only AfroLatina in her cohort. Her experiences on campus have been positive for the most but she acknowledges they could be different than others because of her perspective on race. She views race as insignificant and refuses to be defined by how she physically presents. Natalia speaks Spanish at home but not with friends. Coincidentally, the only AfroLatina friend she has on campus, she met on her way to interview for this study. Natalia believes that many Latino/as are ignorant to the existence of AfroLatina/os. She

had encountered rejection from Latina/os due to her prominent African features but it does not bother her.

**In Natalia's words.** I don't identify myself culturally. I generally don't think in those terms but ethnically and racially I identify as Black and just because it is very simple. It's usually what is on every survey and Census so even if I did have a particular label for myself it wouldn't provide enough insight and explanation into who I am. Black is simple and it is easy. My understanding of my identity has certainly evolved over time. When I was a young girl in my household my complexion was, and still is, about the darkest. I was curious about why my mother is so fair and why I was so much darker than she. My father is darker so I am kind of in the middle of them. I have grown to understand that my color is just as much an accident as any of my other physical attributes. They don't reflect anything about who I am intellectually so I don't count them for much.

My grandmother is of fair complexion and her father was a mulatto. Racially she is a quarter Black, 50% White, and a quarter Indigenous, Indigenous of the Americas. She has always, as far back as I could remember, has always identified herself as a Black woman. I have grown up with my grandmother, she raised me, and she identifies as Black and I identify as Black. My mother is even more fair skinned than my grandmother and she identifies as Black. I actually interviewed her for a course I was taking and I asked her why she identified as a Black woman, when you could have passed as a White woman. She said she couldn't deny her history and her roots. It's simple, I think Black covers everything it covers the racially mixed, AfroColombians, African-American, the African, the Caribbean's I think Black just covers it all. [My grandma and mom] have actually helped to develop my understanding of my identity. Just listening to them talk, the way they relate and we relate amongst ourselves, and the way we talk in general about the way the world works. We generally talk more about the use of intellect and work ethic. That is what drives us. I mean color is really, really, so just secondary. They fostered my educational background from the very beginning. They were the ones that taught me the [importance of finishing] homework. They were the foundation for me and just because they don't help me write my papers, it doesn't mean that they are not part of my academic experience. They provided me the foundation for my self-awareness now and my ability to recognize intellect over color.

In the United States, or just anywhere in the world, the idea of a Black, White, Indigenous, and all the mixes in-between are a pretty easy label to identify. When we are looking at for example let's say Census information it is significant to compare peoples ethnicity and race to other demographics. I basically [settle

for existing categories] and for the purposes of whatever information I identify as Black. Some people don't like Black because of the history. Black people were brought to the United States in the 17<sup>th</sup> century as slaves and were enslaved until 1865. In Columbia slavery existed past 1865 but the island where we are from they didn't have slavery. There was also trading of Blacks off the coast in the coastal cities and so on. The identity of AfroColombian within the mainland has definitely been kept down and a lot of people don't even know there are Black people in Columbia. Those are things that are associated particularly in the western hemisphere with Black people. There's a [common] perception that Black people do not have the potential to amount to as much as their White counterparts. Also, people who are mixed are better off than people who are darker or less mixed. There are all sorts of racist perceptions that are incorrect. I was the only AfroLatina in the honors college and I know it's not because they aren't smart, they just didn't have the information or didn't know about it. In the past, I really understood myself in terms of what I looked like but more and more I try to fine-tune the way I dress, the way that I style my hair, I am very particular about those things. But it is no longer how I identify or how I understand my identity. I really cling more towards my intellect and also to my work ethic, increasingly more as I'm part of the workforce and that takes up most of my time. I would say that my true identities are, I identify very strongly with my work ethic and my intellect.

The beautiful thing about being on a campus in the Bronx on a public campus, in a public institution, is encountering people who were similar to me. I've encountered a number of AfroLatinos and there was understanding from all sides. [Administrators] are more experience dealing with people who are Black and Hispanic. Latinos are from are from different communities and places [around the world]. [Nonetheless] it's still confusing, people are accustomed to being one or the other so I am usually pushed into one category. There is a group of African-Americans that I love hanging out with from time to time from my hometown but I am the only Latino person. There are other groups that I will hang out with [on campus] and they will say, "she is the Black girl but she is from Columbia, but she's a Black girl." It depends what people are accustomed to how they grew up how they categorize people and their understandings of people. I went to high school with fair skinned Dominicans who are like, "no way you are not Columbian," or fair skinned from any other Latin American countries [who say] "oh, no you are not Latina." It's all about you know what they know before hand. African-American usually can tell that I am an American. They can tell that I am Black, but not an ordinary African-American. Whatever that means. They usually guess that I am mixed-race and most put me in different categories. If I was White or maybe fair skinned of any racial background, they would say I am Black. At my most recent job someone filled out one of my forms for me and they circled that I was African-American I mean it was fine but I'm not.



I do see some positive changes across all Black women, regardless where they are from. The fact that [Black] women are finally able to walk outside and let everybody see the texture of their hair, I mean fresh out of the shower, it's fresh from being wet, I mean not even alter the kinky curl pattern. Walking around all day like that. The fact that they are no longer putting this relaxer stuff in their hair... so that they can look more appealing I mean it is obviously a shift but unfortunately, it could lose a lot of the effort and energy that has been invested so far. Lets be honest, in a very real sense there aren't products that are manufactured for women with kinky curly hair. I mean it's really sad that I can't find, I haven't found a single product on any shelf, in any beauty supply store, that I have tried that works well with my hair consistently. It just doesn't. There are products from Columbia that I have family bring and they work wonders but you know in the United States products for natural hair, I don't know that they exist. If they do they are very expensive. [However], yes definitely, I think that it's a shift in identity and I am proud to see that shift.

## **Pao**

***“I feel very proud of my Africaness like my African culture so that is why I identify myself as Black.”***

Pao, 20, nursing major was born in the Bronx but her family moved back to Honduras when she was just a child. She does not identify as a member of the Latina/o community because she endured harassment and discrimination by *mestiza/os* in Honduras. In fact, she gets offended when she is classified as anything other than Black. Pao has encountered minimal rejection from the Garifuna community for not speaking the Garifuna language but she is attempting to learn. Nonetheless, she embraces that identity and the complex history of being Black in Latin America. She is very proud of her Garifuna roots. The way she walks, wears her hair, and presents herself communicates that she is proud of her African roots and has learned to embrace it on campus.

Her definition of Black is broader than U. S. standards. She is adamant to delineate there is a clear distinction between African immigrants, African Americans, and herself. Her experience on campus has been mostly positive but she questions why they fail to offer courses on AfroLatina/o history, particularly because the Schomburg College is nestled in a very ethnic community. She has three very good friends on campus two are Black, Haitian and Jamaican descent, and one light skinned Puerto Rican. They only talk about race when the Puerto Rican is not around because she gets upset at them for talking about it “soo much.”

**In Pao’s words.** I don’t feel Hispanic. I get a little offended when they call me Hispanic. When they [people] hear me speaking Spanish they assume I am Hispanic. I think [it stems from] my childhood [in Honduras]. I was rejected by my classmates because I didn’t look like them. I feel very proud of my Africaness like my African culture so that is why I identify myself as Black. They [kids at school] used to make fun of Blacks, Garifunas, and AfroHondurans. The interesting thing is that I wasn’t like them [other Garifuna kids] because most of the Garifunas in the town I used to live in spoke a weird Spanish. They usually speak another language [Garifuna dialect] and they would dress differently than me. I wasn’t like them (the normal Garifuna that had just moved to the city) but they (the mestizos) would say things like, “oh, you are going to sell *pan de coco*” because that is what most Garifunas sold in that part of Honduras. They would also point out a lot of stereotypes and would say very bad things like, “I was dark skinned because I didn’t take a shower.” That is why I felt rejected by them, they were mean.

Even though I am very proud of my culture, I am also rejected by them because I do not speak Garifuna. That is a key to being a good Garifuna for most adults, speaking the language. I don’t speak the language because my parents were working all the time so I had no contact with the language. Just because of that I feel that it is difficult sometimes for me to classify myself as a Garifuna but I am very proud of being Garifuna. My pride is stronger than that even though I don’t [speak Garifuna].

On campus I am seen as an African-American but if I am at the place [neighborhood] where I live, they can see that I look different than the African-Americans. They see that I am Honduran. Depending on where I am will

categorize me differently. I speak with a Hispanic accent so when I speak most people think that I am Dominican which is “oh my God no!” It is worse if you call me Dominican because I have had contact with a lot of them, a many of those friends I have are like the same reason why I don’t identify myself as a Hispanic, don’t like to be called Black, and I have learned that they have a reason why. There is a story between them and another country that took control over their land, and most of those people were black. Maybe that’s the reason why they do not like to be called black. I, in the other hand, love to be called Black. I haven’t actually been to Honduras in a while but I feel like they are more open. They want to know more about our culture but here [in United States] they are like trying to shut us down. The African-American that I have met they do not reject us. They really actually like Garifunas a lot, based on my experience. They feel a little identified with us, they feel like we know what they go through because most of them feel the same way as we feel with our own people. I wasn’t born there but I was raised there so I feel like I am from there and they still didn’t look at me as part of their people.

I think hair is very important. There is this idea of [beauty standards] that affects everyone, this is White and this is the Black. If you are somewhere in between Black and White it’s acceptable. If you are more in the White you hair is less curly and you are in a good place. If you are closer to the Black side there is something wrong with you or with your family. Everything that has something to be with Black or African is bad. I feel now days it has changed a lot from like the year 2000 because I remember those years but it is still like very bad. I used to perm my hair it used to be [medium length] and for Black people that is long. Once you perm your hair, your hair is more like sensible it falls easily because of the chemicals. It gets weak. I decided not to perm my hair anymore, which included cutting off all of my hair. That was a big impact. I decided to do it because my life has been a little boring and I have not tried crazy things. This is the first crazy thing I have tried but what I want to tell you is that my mom was really angry with me. She felt that I was changing just because a lot of people were changing and that I was following what they were doing. I also wanted to do it because I wanted to embrace my culture. I always said that I was proud of being who I am but was still perming my hair. I used to think that God had made a mistake by making my hair this way so I should straighten it. During my transition, my Hispanic friends would say things like “oh but your hair looks nice like this but then you are going to have bad hair.” Now they are dealing with it. I also have to deal with my hair because it is hard to do my hair like this but now they have accepted it. They have recognized that I am proud of who I am so I won’t hear what they are saying. Sometimes I’m walking down the street and Hispanic people would say bad things about my hair in Spanish thinking that I do not understand what they say. Before I used to take my time to explain others why

I do not have a “bad hair” but an Afro, and why they should respect that. Now, I do not even care. This is because I don’t seek for anyone’s acceptance.

I find it more important that you keep your own culture. You don’t have to be like they say that once you come here it is a melting pot. No, when we melt to be like the other people in society it is like we are losing our own identities. I went to [an international] high school and I could see how some people would retain their culture and they would be really proud of it and not change because they are here [in the United States]. Some would change because of the [pressure to assimilate] by people. Other people changed because they wanted to change and that is ok because you should be able to do what you want. On campus, I don’t know they [staff and faculty] expect me to be all nasty or have a bad attitude all the time when I approach them to ask them a question. [I think] it’s because they have this expectation of Black people being *siempre a la defensiva*, against all people. I am a very open person I like to meet people from other places from other countries and cultures. I want to see how they are different from me and even if I don’t like it, I try to accept it, but some people feel like “oh, if you are not like me you are an enemy.” That is what I am trying to not portray. It is actually a little scary that people like to classify you because of how you look or your ethnic group and you are like “no, I am not like them I am different.” I identify myself as a person who is very proud of my culture. A person who is very interested in learning more and more about our [AfroLatino] history. There are very interesting things that I didn’t know before about my own Garifuna culture, like the fact that we are more Indian than African. I didn’t know that. We also have different genera’s of music that portray a different meaning and a different message, like if you hear *punta* and *mascaro* they sound the same but they are different. They communicate different type of information and that comes from Black history. It’s very interesting and I’m interested in my culture and well we are very interesting.

## **Rafael**

***“It is very difficult to bring all these things that makeup who you are into one nice phrase that rolls off the tongue.”***

Rafael, 20, nursing student was raised by a single-mother who works three jobs in order to make ends meet. His father has been absent from his life but Rafael has grown into a very mature, giving, and hardworking young man. Despite being told he would “amount to nothing” by high school teachers, Rafael was recently admitted to a very

competitive nursing program at Schomburg College. Rafael has does not speak Spanish but has always desired to master the language. He feels being monolingual has prevented him from connecting to his Latino side. On the flip side, he speaks “the Bronx” which has allowed him to build rapport and trust with his patients. He categorizes that as an unquestionable successful use of language, even if “the Bronx” speak is not officially recognized.

Rafael sees his personal journey reflected in the story of the Bronx. He was born and raised there, he knows of no other place. He sees parallels in their stories. The Bronx was burning but rose from the ashes. It is filled with stories of resilience, tenacity, and has a very unique and distinct culture. Rafael feels his Afro side was denied to him with the absence of his father. He was raised in a home that was culturally Puerto Rican with a mix of St. Croix. Regardless of how much he wanted to connect with his Latina/o peers, he did not have the language to provide him with the required authenticity. He does not spend much time on campus but his circle of friends are more like study companions. They are united by their quest to graduate rather than points of interest.

**In Rafael’s words.** Well culturally I would identify myself as a Bronx native. I believe the Bronx is not just a geographic location. I believe it holds a different culture within itself you tell people you are from the Bronx, and you know, it just has a certain feel to it. It is one thing to say you are from New York and another thing to say you are from the Bronx. The Bronx culture is pretty much Brown from the ground up. If you studied the Bronx it has a history of you know rebuilding and people going through this whole process of figuring out who they are with the music, the art, and the people who came up from nothing. They are making a statement, finding their own place. I believe they kinda made a place for people like myself. There are graffiti artists and writers from the Bronx making a name for themselves they came from nothing.

I am Latino it would be weird for me to say that I am not. My roots still come partially from the Latino heritage of my grandparents [who are] both Puerto Rican. [However], there are barriers that I face with the whole language and people being confused when I cannot answer them in Spanish. I still feel that it is a valid part of who I am as well my home culture. My mother's interactions, the way she cooks, the way she raised me, you know, it is all her mannerisms everything is all Latino. The Afro side, its not that I don't inherit my Afro culture but it's a matter of me being in touch with it. I get the Afro side from my father and my father has been absent my entire life. I don't feel that I have had the right introduction, or the right way of getting into it, I don't know if that is the proper way of saying it. Growing up, for the most part, it was mostly out of sight, out of mind. If he had been around or had lived with me, I could have at least asked him about this or what about grandma? Cuz the only time I could remember that he came over with her was when I was in fifth grade. Her accent was so different and I just remember the accent and she was soo dark. I don't even know her maiden name that is the crazy part. I thought she was you know Spanish so I called her *abuela* and she was like "*Cali* why you calling me *abuela*? I am grandma!" That just took me back I was like "wow!" Other than that, I don't remember connecting to my Afro side through my father.

I would go to school and I wouldn't talk much with the Spanish kids who had just come to the country because I cannot speak their language. Over time, the more English they knew the more I was able to interact with them. It kinda went from me being Spanish to me being, feeling more and leaning more, towards being Black. There was a point where I did align myself mostly with the Black kids solely because of the way I talked. I had a heavy Bronx accent, I spoke the slang, you know I sounded mostly like them. I didn't speak Spanish at all. To this day I don't talk with a Spanish accent. I mostly considered myself to be Black especially in my family, I am the only dark one. My siblings used to call me the Black sheep of the family so then you have those things being said to you, being spoken to you so you at some point you stop fighting it and accept it. That whole idea of being Spanish or being Black you know at the end we all lived in the Bronx. The older I got I didn't really align myself [with one group more than with another]. I didn't want that to be the first thing people thought of me as, I am more than just one or the other.

My father, from what I understand, his mother was on the land (St. Croix) for as long as their lineage goes back and my fathers' father is from Bayamon, Puerto Rico. My mother's parents are both from Puerto Rico. It is very difficult to bring all these things that makeup who you are into one nice phrase that rolls off the tongue. I would say it was very difficult to identify who I was. I've looked at myself in the mirror and obviously you go through a process of elimination, of I am not White, I am not that African but you know the melanin is there, it came

from somewhere. It's not really you know the Spaniard side, not really, it came from somewhere, and you look at your last name and it's Garcia. Ok, that's from Spain where did that come from? So you are like ok, I am Spanish, I am Hispanic to a certain extent, my last name is Spanish but then you tell people you are Spanish and they start speaking to you in Spanish. They expect you to know it and then I'm like ok I do not know Spanish but I am going to go home and make some rice and beans. Is it mine? Is it a cultural thing? Is it really who I am? It really was hard for me to sit with people who knew who they were and the people who have these cultural abilities, and have these you know racial affirmations, and for me to put myself with them I didn't really feel [like I belonged]. I felt like I was too much of ... I felt like I was too all over the place really. I would say it was difficult to really culturally identify myself.

A lot of friends or acquaintances that I have met tell me that they were born in their respective homelands. They are from DR a lot, a lot of people that I know are first and second generation. People who came over with their mothers on the plane and they come from that and they have seen it [the motherland]. I didn't really. I grew up in the Bronx. My hometown is the Bronx. I have lived here my whole life this is all I really knew. Now I have to sit with people who are from DR, they have family in DR, all their family is in DR, they have pictures of everything, they have their land, they have *bodegas*. The store is their property the land they are there, they have history. I am here and my lineage, my heritage, my people are supposed to be... they can say they are from there. I've seen it. I've heard it. I witnessed it. I have been a part of it. I don't feel I've really had that same [experience]. The only time I have really been to St. Croix and seen what my mother was talking about was when I was in fifth grade, I think I was 11 and this was during my uncles last few days of his life, we went down to say goodbye to him and we got to stay in his house for a week. She took me around and she was showing me the projects where her and her sisters grew up. All the stories that she would tell me came to life. I felt like that was only one part of the piece. My father really holds what is left of everything. These are people that I am sitting with [in class] who know both of their parents. Who have seen them, who have met them, who have interacted with them and that is not something that I have really had a chance to have. It was very hard for me to affirm myself with them when they had everything in a photo album. They had seen everything and all I really have of my heritage was a week at my uncles' house split between the land and the horses and the hospital.

I feel like sometimes even though they did speak the tongue there was a certain level that if you were from the land [St. Croix and Puerto Rico] itself, or if you had gone there and visited, you could connect with them because that is what they used to talk about. I can't really say if it would have been different for me. Maybe it still would have been the same because I wasn't from Puerto Rico. I

wasn't from Cuba. Maybe it wouldn't have mattered as much, I can't really say, there is always a chance. I still feel that everybody's life is different and everybody who I have seen has walked a different path. I feel proud standing next to my brothers and sisters [on campus] who are from Queens and took the train from Brooklyn and came through from Harlem. I am proud to call them my brothers and sisters. I cherish those experiences every single day and I look forward to doing that you know for as long as I am there. My classmates, they stress out so much you know and I tend to be very calm. There are times where calm is how you have to be because where [the Bronx] I am from you didn't know what was going to happen. Things happened in an instance and you have to keep a clear head. You gotta fight through it and you gotta keep moving.

You know my odds are not so good. Personally, I want to make something of myself. I have seen what people have chosen to do with their lives and what politics and economics has done to marginalize people. It has stigmatized them. The media has done tons to give us people a bad name. I feel that we are more hungry, well every generation has had their group of people that have risen, but as a AfroLatino I really want to make something of myself. I don't want to fall prey to the vices of the city even though they're all around me. I don't want to fall prey to the expectations that my high school teachers had of me. No, I am not going to be another dropout or be another problem in society. That is the thing you know people do see those things it is not just for Hollywood to make a buck. It does happen. The company I kept [in high school] and the people I hung around with, we all heard the same thing, we all heard the nonsense, we all heard the same comments [that we would amount to nothing. Not that we cared anyway but it comes down to what you don't know. They [high school teachers] didn't know us. I knew I wanted to grow up and do something with myself and give back when I graduate. Give back whenever you can that's just what I got from it and I hope that is what my classmates got from it. That's what I want to continue to do, to be a person who is capable of giving back in a number of ways. Whether it is with my degree or my personality. As a student I feel that that is more of a motivation to do that, I see people in my building and they don't go to school they are working, you know God bless them and they have jobs thank God for that, but I want better for myself. I see that many, including in my family, have done it and I want better for myself.

## **Rigo**

***"I have to love myself for who I am, and not be so much defined by what other people say I am."***



Rigo, 44, pre-nursing student was born and raised in the Midwest. His father is African American and his mother Dominican and Rigo embraces both identities equally. He grew up in a “ghetto” of St. Louis that was predominantly African American. Racial diversity was non-existent and he was classified as Black by others despite being AfroLatino. Rigo witnessed how other women harassed his mother and sisters due to their “good hair” and lighter skin but did not understand the animosity until much older. He grew up speaking Spanglish (mixture between English and Spanish) but he does not master Spanish. He had his first introduction to the diversity of Dominican culture when he moved to New York City. He loves Washington Heights, the Dominican enclave of New York City, and strongly feels his identities are validated there. He spends as much time there as possible and firmly believes moving to the city, was by far, the best decision of his life.

Traveling to the Dominican Republic has reinforced his sense of belonging in the Dominican community – as an AfroDominican. Although Rigo celebrates both sides of his ethnic identities, he tends to feel more connected to his Dominican side. On campus, his group of friends are all pre-health students but they do not talk much about race. Their focus is to get through the program and to graduate. Rigo has not felt excluded on campus and is very grateful for the opportunity to be on a college campus located in the Bronx. He feels regardless of how much discrimination he may encounter in New York, it could never be worst than what he endured in the Midwest.

**In Rigo’s words.** Racially I identify as AfroDominican, Blatino or African Latin American because of my parents. One parent is from the Dominican Republic my mother, *mi madre*, and my dad is from Mississippi. I was born in St.

Louis, I don't know how that happened but it did. I don't have a problem with it but people I deal with sometimes have an issue with it. They say, "you have brown skin why do you think you're Black. Why are you speaking Spanish?" The reality is some Dominicans think that they are something other than Black. They say "you're Black, you're Black why do you speak Spanish?" Growing up when I had long hair they [African American kids] would ask, "Are you wearing a weave. You think you're cute." It was silliness. It doesn't bother me too much because I know who I am and I embrace them both.

I have not had a problem in identifying and have always identified as both [Dominican and Black]. I love both parts of my heritage and they are both very rich. When I am here [U.S.] it is great and when I am in Santo Domingo, usually during *semana santa* or some holiday, it's also great. I usually go over there and hang out with my cousins. A lot of times there can be issues with it, well I usually receive it from both sides, like they want me to claim one. On the one part I receive it from the Black [African American] community who say I should just do the Halle Berry thing. She is half-and-half, Black and White, but she identifies totally as Black and negates the other part. They say, "you think you are better who do you think you? Why are you speaking Spanish? Why don't you drop that?" I refuse to do that it just, it is not who I am. But for me I identify with both it is very important. A lot of people tell me, "you have to choose one or you have to choose the other, you cannot do this you cannot do that." But you know me I am very outspoken. People do not define me. I have to define myself and I have to be proud of both of my cultures, which I am, and that is with my mother being from the Dominican Republic and my dad being from here [U.S] and I have pride in being AfroLatino.

In the Midwest there weren't a lot of Dominicans there, you literally had to identify as one thing [Black] just to fit in, at least when I was younger. Progressively growing up, I started to settle into my skin, especially moving to New York. I mean like I said growing up in the Midwest there weren't other Dominicans other than my family and *Mejicanos*. That was it in the St. Louis area. What really, really, changed with me and what really grew on me, was when I came to New York and people would be like, "*eres Dominicano?* Are you Dominican?" I got more comfortable and I was like, "well yes" and I started seeing all these Dominicans. I was like "wow!"... and they were like "you are Dominican, you are Dominican, you are Dominican do not deny that." I would have conversations with people and they would be like, "be proud of being *Dominicano moreno*, you are *moreno*." Yes, that is what they would say "don't deny it" that is what they would say, "be proud of that" and that set into my psyche, my consciousness and I said "you know what? I have to adopt more of a loving myself more" and saying "hey, I am not going to deny my identity." Not to mention with schooling and stuff like that with scholarships, I was open to both.

Moving to New York City helped me more because being around more people that favored you know [being Black and Latino]. That was more of the key that helped me grow more into my skin.

When I came to New York as a performing artist, they put me in speech classes. I had a Midwestern, Spanish accent. The speech teachers made it sound soo horrible. They [would mimic] the way I spoke and eventually I had to change it and enunciate all words. Sometimes in Spanish we run words together and stuff like that. They made me do speech for about two years but you know what? It actually helped me in the long run. People could understand me better but coming from the Midwest and having a bit of Midwest, Southern, and Spanish accent people didn't know where the hell I was from. People were like "where the hell are you from?" It was a little mixing. My speech teacher would call me out in the front of the class, she would say that she didn't like the way I said things. I was petrified. I was scared into speaking more properly which now going into the career that I'm going into [nursing] its better 'cause people can understand me much better. [However] back then it was horrifying and [humiliating]. It made me think that there was something wrong with me. I had just come to New York and I saw these people, I didn't get the big deal, but for them it was a huge deal.

People always try to make themselves better, someone tried to offend me by calling me Haitian. I was like, "let me tell you something, I am very proud [of who I am] if I was Haitian it would be ok." I am Dominican. I am Black and Dominican. My dad is from Mississippi my mom is from Santo Domingo. I have no Haitian blood in me whatsoever but if I was Haitian I would say it! If I was Haitian, I don't have a problem with it but these people, usually it would be *Boricuas*, they would say stuff like that because you don't speak enough Spanish to be Dominican. There's this whole issue with *Boricuas* and *Dominicans*, which is a big rivalry in New York City, which I was not used to. Honestly I believe it's because *Puerto Rico*, being the Commonwealth, a lot of privilege is given to Puerto Ricans. They are not yet a state or they don't want to be, some of them don't want to be a state. We [the U.S.] utilize Vieques the naval base there [in Puerto Rico]. I think that the United States does not want to deal with the Dominican Republic because in turn they have to deal with Haitians. They are part of Hispanola.

I believe some Puerto Ricans have a sense of entitlement. I have a lot of *Boricua* friends who are Puerto Rican. When I met them I asked if they were Dominican and they get soo, totally, offended and they would be like, "aaahhhh NO, NO" they make it sound like if it was horrible. I say I know you're Dominican and right away they are like, "I am not Dominican don't you ever say I am Dominican" they get very, very, very aggravated. I don't know why they say it like that. It's kinda sad I have run into a lot of people like that but then I have

ran into a subsection of them that say, “you don’t speaking enough Spanish so you, you aren’t really Dominican.” There is a lot of friction in New York City between Dominicans and Puerto Ricans. I think part of it is just being in this country because I did not notice it [in the Dominican Republic]. I have been over there so much, so much that I was considering buying a house. I did not see so much of an issue but here in New York, people don’t talk about it because New York is supposed to be so progressive. There are parts of New York that keep it very hidden, the racism they hide it well. It is more progressive than the South of course, I can say that because I have been down South. You go down South I don’t care if you speak Spanish if you’re a person of color you are Black period.

On campus we form study groups to make sure we stay on top of things. In my study group we speak Spanglish, we do yeah, for the most part we mostly speak Spanglish or English. Because when you’re studying biology and stuff like that, you need to understand something... *como se dice*... well it doesn’t matter *porque* you have to say it in English anyway. You have to be here [in the United States] and work in hospitals. I don’t worry much about anything else on campus because I just need to graduate. God is good to me, God is good. I have faith that is one thing that is very real for me and has let me love myself my entire life. God made me who I am. I am who I am and I cannot change anything. I cannot change my skin color. I cannot change who I am. I cannot change what I look like. I am not a perfect person but I am a canvas being painted on every day, every single day. Most of them [family members] have not even graduated high school. None of my brothers and sisters and I am the only one that went to college. I am the one that picked up and got a scholarship moved from the Midwest to New York City.

My [experience has been] that when you are darker skinned and you speak Spanish people try to define you a certain type of way. My sisters had a very difficult time with their long hair. I got to the point where I felt comfortable in my own skin and I said “you know what? I have to be proud of who I am.” Both are such rich cultures, as you know, I have to love myself for who I am, and not be so much defined by what other people say I am. Coming to the New York City but also going to the Dominican Republic and spending time there helped a great deal. Seeing and spending time with my cousins and stuff like that, everybody was so rich and dark, even darker than I am. Just seeing more people that were like me, spending more time in DR really helped me embrace my identity so much more. I had to remove myself from the Midwest and go to places like New York and the Dominican Republic to see more people that looked like myself, to embrace myself. That is how I became more comfortable in my skin. I think it would have been more of a struggle had I still been in the Midwest.

## Sally

*“I knew Spanish then they wouldn’t see me for color they would see me as a person.”*

Sally, 26, is a pre-health major and largely identifies as mixed race in order to bypass the questioning of her identities. Sally is dark skinned with prominent African features, and “kinky” hair. She has experienced a lot of rejection from her Latina/o peers, which has propelled her to further adopt the mixed race identity. Sally’s mother is Puerto Rican but never taught her how to speak Spanish. Sally feels regardless if she spoke Spanish, the Latina/o students would still reject her because of her skin color. As a child she experienced great rejection by her classmates and it continues to impact her as a young adult. Some people approach her and assume she is Dominican. They begin speaking Spanish to her right away – assuming she speaks the language – but as soon as they find out she does not speak Spanish their attitude towards her changes.

Sally has a strong sense of who she is but never engaged in race conversations with her parents, she states “it simply never arose.” They raised her to have a positive self-image and to look beyond race and ethnicity. They felt it was more important to raise her to love herself rather than to conform to prescribed standards about her identity based on the manifestation of her genetic makeup. On campus, the majority of her friends are non-Latina/os – although she admits she has a very diverse group of friends. Sally feels campus is a welcoming place and that student clubs offer a place for diverse students like herself. She is the president of a multicultural club on campus for pre-health majors and she asserts her involvement has further solidified her mixed race identity. Sally is a very confident young lady and does not seek acceptance into a group solely based on her

genetic makeup. She needs substance and interests to bring them together. Her group of friends on campus are her friends because they have many things in common – not necessarily their ethnic or racial identity.

**In Sally's words.** I identify myself as mixed only because I have many different ethnicities going through me and it just makes it so much easier to identify myself with other people. Yes, I do have African-American which is in a place on it's own. I have some Puerto Rican, some Irish, and the list continues. I have no problem identifying who I am and I wear my color proudly. If someone was to ask me, what it was to be specific, I would definitely do it but if I couldn't then I will just use mixed. I don't feel I have to identify myself to anyone. I am definitely an open person. I have absolutely no lack of self-esteem. Nothing takes away from who I am, I have been that way all my life.

When I was younger I used to be the only dark skinned female in my class so the rest of my classmates were either predominately Puerto Rican, predominately Mexican, and predominately something else. Something specific but I was possibly the only mixed one in the group. I did identify with Latinas when necessary, so if there was a situation that arose it would come up about how I identified, but I was also shunt for it because of my color because I am dark. A lot of them were really light skin Puerto Ricans with the long straight hair and they spoke Spanish. I didn't so I couldn't identify with them in particular but that never stopped me from changing who I knew I was. Both of my parents they are highly into identification and positive self impact. When I would go home I would never tell them about these problems but they would notice something was wrong. They were always encouraged me to stick to what I knew, to stick to who I am, and to not follow the crowd. They didn't want me to change who I am just because the majority of the people were a particular way.

I think it's unfortunate, if the experience would have been better I would have fit in more but I don't think I would have been the person I am today. I think I'm the best person that I could possibly be. For example, I am a very caring open person but if I would have been lighter skinned in my childhood, I would have had a more narrow point of view. I would have only taken care of the people that identified with me because that was the way other people were. I would be more like them and I wouldn't be so open to take care of other people who are different from me. It is really important to be [caring and open minded] to be a good nurse.

Now days, when a guy wants to hit on me he will speak to me in Spanish and I am looking at him with a confused look and he is like, "you don't understand? Are you Dominican?" I say "no" and he is like "oh, you look

Dominican.” I know its because I am darker skinned and I say “no, I am not I am more mixed.” Then I kinda just walk away because obviously they know more Spanish than English and I can’t communicate with them. It’s all based on skin color, most Puerto Ricans are light-skinned, Dominicans are dark skinned, Mexicans are mixed race. Each Latino has a different skin color but they don’t realize that there are all shades in all groups. I mean, I didn’t get discouraged I wasn’t upset. A lot of people get it but a lot of people get angry because they are miss-categorized by their race. I just found it humorous to say the least but it didn’t bother me either each way. I felt that I had to correct him in the sense that no I am not Dominican because I am darker. I am not going to identify with Hispanic race, I will be Puerto Rican because that is what I have going to my veins.

My culture is all over, I mean if I was to say anything, I would say my culture is more watered down to the American aspect. It is a big old melting pot. I don’t have a particular favorite food, I don’t have a particular favorite music, I listen to everything, I eat anything, I go anywhere. I just however I feel like it is not a particular preference. If I spoke Spanish, I think I would probably appreciate it more [Latino culture] only because I could communicate with them better. I don’t know if somebody is speaking negatively to me but in Spanish. They know I don’t know Spanish. It makes things a little bit more difficult but if I knew Spanish then they wouldn’t see me for color they would see me as a person.

My group of friends on campus are very mixed. I have Latina, Latino friends I have Caribbean friends, I have White, I have Anglo-Saxon, I have friends from all over and are all pre-health students. We all have the general goal to either major in biology or pre-health. We all have that in common, we are all taking the sciences together. We all suffer together, so you know we all help each other, and that is what makes us a big family. I always feel a language barrier is difficult because a lot of Latino students, when they come here and go to American schools, they don’t necessarily cater to the students. They tend to struggle so I feel that in both high school and college or even an elementary school we should cater to try to assist or teaching them [appropriately]. We are in the Bronx but not everyone on campus is from the Bronx. We aren’t necessarily included in what is taught, we can’t worry about that, we are worried about graduating.

I guess its human nature that people will just labeled you as how they see you. They don’t wait to talk to you or try to get to know you. Some people see my skin color they automatically assume I am Dominican or Caribbean. They will talk to me in that aspect and I feel it’s kind of the worst way to judge someone, based on skin color but that’s the world we live in. Sadly, if I were to communicate with them in that language [Spanish] they would say, “ok, so she is

Latina in that aspect because she knows our language.” I still think that it wouldn’t change the fact that I soon as they see me, they would automatically assume I am not Hispanic because I am dark. [My parents] are both mixed so I am a melting pot because they are a melting pot. As far as how they identify themselves that I don’t know. We have never really had a discussion about race and culture on a more personal level. I do like to joke I and say I am mixed but the very first thing I would to choose to identify as, I would automatically say AfroLatina, then I would say my other slew of cultures that I have.



Table 4.1 Participant Demographics

#	Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Class Standing	Spanish at Home	Spanish with Friends	Nation of Birth	Father's Nation of Birth	Mother's Nation of Birth
P1	A	Male	34	Senior	Yes	Yes	United States	Ecuador	Puerto Rico
P2	Angelo*	Male	30	Senior	Yes	Yes	United States	Dominican Republic	Dominican Republic
P3	Cristhian*	Male	20	Junior	Yes	Yes	Dominican Republic	Dominican Republic	Dominican Republic
P4	Damian	Male	22	Senior	Yes	Yes	United States	Dominican Republic	Dominican Republic
P5	David*	Male	48	Junior	Yes	Yes	United States	Dominican Republic	Dominican Republic
P6	Destiny	Female	22	Junior	Yes	Yes	United States	Dominican Republic	Dominican Republic
P7	Lily*	Female	23	Senior	Yes	Yes	United States	Honduras	Honduras
P8	Natalia*	Female	22	Senior	Yes	No	United States	Trinidad	Colombia
P9	Pao*	Female	20	Senior	Yes	Yes	United States	Honduras	Honduras
P10	Rafael*	Male	20	Sophomore	No	No	United States	St. Croix	St. Croix
P11	Rigo*	Male	44	Junior	Yes	Yes	United States	United States	Dominican Republic
P12	Sally	Female	26	Senior	No	No	United States	U.S./Irish	Puerto Rico

\* Indicates participation in a pre and post interview

Table 4.2 Participant Characteristics as a Percentage

<i>Characteristic</i>	<i>Percent</i>
<b>Gender</b>	
Female	42% (n = 5)
Male	58% (n = 7)
<b>Nativity</b>	
United States	92% (n = 11)
Dominican Republic	8% (n = 1)
<b>Speaks Spanish at Home</b>	
Yes	83% (n = 10)
No	17% (n = 2)
<b>Speaks Spanish with Friends</b>	
Yes	75% (n = 9)
No	25% (n = 3)
<b>Parent's Attend College</b>	
Yes	50% (n = 6)
No	50% (n = 6)
<b>Household Type</b>	
Single Mother	50% (n = 6)
Both Parents	50% (n = 6)
<b>First in Family to Attend College</b>	
No	58% (n = 7)
Yes	42% (n = 5)

## Chapter 5 Analysis and Findings for Question One

The preceding chapter offered vignettes of all twelve study participants. Their self-styled narratives provide a glimpse into the intricacies involved when AfroLatina/o students reflect on how they molding their own identities in a highly racialized society, and how that may impact their experiences on campus. This chapter addresses the first research question: How do AfroLatina/o college students mold their racial, ethnic, and/or cultural identities? Does history play a role? Borderlands theory (Anzaldúa, 2007) was utilized as a framework to help conceptualize how AfroLatina/os traverse, adjust, and navigate three cultures – Black, Latina/o, and U. S. Furthermore, it is useful in understanding the process AfroLatina/os undergo in molding their identities within a highly racialized society. The theory accentuates the tensions that arise when individuals are forced to consistently navigate between cultures, physical spaces, language, and family.

The first section of this chapter, AfroLatina/os the *Malinali Tenepat*, highlights how AfroLatina/os represent an amalgamation of prehistoric, colonization, Latina/o, and U. S. culture. In Latin America the *Malinali Tenepat*, *malinche* or *malintzín* is seen as the pasty (Anzaldúa, 2007). She sold out her people to the conquistadores, as such she is casted into perpetual rejection. The silencing and rejection of *Malinali Tenepat* parallels AfroLatina/os invisibility within the ethnic category of “Hispanic.” It highlights participant’s stories of navigating the rejection of their African lineage within a highly prejudiced Latina/o community. The investment in *mestizaje* has encouraged a Latin

American identity, which deliberately moves away from *Indigenismo* but completely overlooks Blackness.

The second section of this chapter presents a new consciousness, the development of a new identity. Most participants reported their identity was something new, beyond that of the *mestiza/o* identity, a new type of person born from the historical legacy of colonization. Yet, colorism has been utilized as a tool to deliberately exclude AfroLatina/os from Latinidad and *mestizaje* serves as the primary mode for their exclusion. I have termed their new identity *una nueva raza aun mas cósmica*. This notion of *una raza aun mas cósmica* expands upon the philosophy of *la raza cósmica* (Vasconcelos, 1966) to include and celebrate the long neglected African lineages of Latina/s. This section is informed by stories of resilience, authorship, and self-awareness.

### **AfroLatina/os the *Malinali Tenepat***

The *Malinali Tenepat*, the *Malinche*, or *Malintzín*. “*La chingada* – the fucked one. She has become the bad word... the woman who sold out her people to the Spaniards” (Anzaldúa, 2007, p. 44). Similar to the experiences of AfroLatian/os in the Latina/o community, the *Malinali Tenepat* is rejected in the new *mestizaje*. She is not seen as worthy or representative of *mestizaje*, *la nueva raza*, the new race.

Not me sold out my people but they me. Because of the color of my skin they betrayed me. The dark-skinned woman has been silenced, gagged, caged,... for 300 years she has been slaved... for 300 years she was invisible, she was not heard. Many times she wished to speak, to act, to protest, to challenge. The odds heavily against her... she remained faceless and voiceless, but a light shone through her veil of silence. (p. 45)

In extracting the essence of her passage, the silencing and rejection of *Malinali Tenepat* parallels AfroLatina/os invisibility within the ethnic category of “Hispanic.” Although African lineage is not highlighted in her passage, one could extend the marginalization of *Malinali Tenepat* into conceptualizing how AfroLatina/o college students find themselves in a constant identity negotiation process.

Interviews with participants revealed some of them experience partial-rejection, from both Black and Latina/o groups, but for different reasons. There appeared to be no clear delineation between having dark skin color and prominent African features – or at least serving as the only reason for their exclusion. The lines are much more blurred and extend back to colonization. Similarly, *Malinali Tenepat* is the historical patsy, she is blamed for the undesirable side of the *mestiza/o* identity – the Indigenous side. However, to some extent the Indigenous side has been absorbed or adopted and the new *Malinali Tenepat* is African lineage. Consequently, all participants reported withstanding varying levels of rejection due to their Blackness or some aspect of their African lineage.

Some have experienced transnational rejection while others have found some refuge within the city due to its density of compatriots. Nonetheless, the confines between Latinidad and Blackness are extremely frail. Participants reported those confines are even more uncompromising for a person with prominent African features and/or dark skin. Colorism manifested itself in different ways either through jokes, comments, or outright exclusion. This section has three subsections – rejection of Blackness, Black is bad, and the colonization of identity.

**Rejection of Blackness.** A common theme across interviews was the rejection of Blackness within the Latina/o community. The degree of rejection varied by location and personal experiences but they all faced some degree of estrangement. Even participants who had transnational ties agreed the message was the same across nations – Blackness is undesirable and not part of our *mestiza/o* identity. Damian captured their sentiment in one sentence, “Latinos deny they have African ancestry, they want nothing to do with it.” Three study participants grew up in Latin American countries (two in Honduras and one in the Dominican Republic) and shared similar experiences. Pao, a dark skinned young lady, was born in the United States but was raised in Honduras – her parent’s nation of origin. She is an “extremely proud Garifuna” and does not identify as Latina. Pao experienced constant mockery and rejection from her *mestiza/o* classmates and eventually decided to embrace her Blackness by rejecting her Latinidad.

They [mestizo kids] used to make fun of Blacks... the way most Garifunas, most AfroHondurans look like. They would say things like, very bad things, like I was dark skinned because I didn't take a shower or something so that is why I felt rejected by them... I don't feel (long pauses). I don't feel Hispanic. I get a little offended when they call me Hispanic when they hear me speaking Spanish and this is maybe because of my childhood. I felt I was rejected by my classmates because I didn't look like them. I feel very proud of my African culture so that is why I identify myself as Black.

Pao adamantly rejects any connection with Latina/os, including the Spanish language, which she considers to be equally oppressive. Nonetheless, she knows being bilingual in the United States is a valuable asset and she takes advantage of the benefits. “On my resume I always put that I am Hispanic because I know speaking Spanish will open a lot of doors... I am just taking advantage of the language that is all.” She has coped with the

extensive rejection by retaliating and “taking advantage” of being considered Latina in order to gain employment. Yet, she does not see *mestizaje* as an option, in fact, she correlates *mestiza/os* with prejudice and ignorance.

Pao’s sister, Lili, also participated in the study and shared similar experiences of discrimination and prejudice. They grew up in a predominantly *mestiza/o* city in Honduras and although other Hondurans are aware of the Garifuna population, they are rejected and treated as perpetual foreigners. Both Pao and Lili mentioned common knowledge of Garifunas existing but they are not accepted as Hondurans because of their prominent African features. Well aware of the discriminatory sentiment towards Garifunas, their parents warned them of the deeply rooted prejudice that exists in the city and the need to stay strong. Lili mentioned, “knowing” that she “was different” than other *mestiza/o* kids, and in a remarkable manner it prepared her to cope with the cruelty of her classmates.

My parents used to let us know that we were from a minority, in the place where we used to live [in Honduras] and I don’t know, I always knew that I was different from most [mestizo] children... They would say, I don’t know how to say in English... so I will say it in Spanish.... *Oh negra cachuda, negra color del Diablo, negra color de la noche. Cosas así. Eso es lo que mas decían...los niños y un poquitos mas grandes pero adultos nunca me dijeron nada. Aunque uno podía ver en los ojos y verdad y en la forma de actuar mas o menos pero verbalmente no.*

She was called the devil among other insults due to her skin color. Being called the devil in a Latin American country that is heavily Catholic carries a great deal of meaning. It is anchored in the historical struggle of colonization and *mestizaje* – both of which view African lineage as undesirable. Lili shared other insults *mestiza/o* kids would yell at her

just for being Garifuna. She talked about the “feeling” she would get from adults “[the adults never said anything, however, one could see it in their eyes, and in reality, the way they would act, more or less, but verbally they never said anything].” Despite what Lili experienced, she still identifies racially as “either Black or AfroLatina” but not Latina alone. Nonetheless, both sisters experienced extreme rejection due to being Garifunas in Latin America.

Honduras does not have a very large AfroLatina/o population and some may argue that in such communities AfroLatina/os could experience more prejudice. Nonetheless, Caribbean countries do have a larger Black population but prejudice is just as rampant. A majority of study participants could trace their heritage to the Dominican Republic. They all reported experiencing lots of prejudice and discrimination due to their skin color and/or phenotype. Angelo was born in the United States but culturally identifies as Dominican due to his parents lineage. Even though he identifies as Dominican he is often perceived as not being Dominican due to his dark skin and physical features. This struggle extends into his home where he had to consistently remind others of his Dominican identity – despite them seeing his Blackness as a symbol of otherness. Below he describes how Dominicans disregard their African ancestry. AfroLatinidad is seldom a topic of conversation but when it is mentioned, it is in a negative light or embedded within racist jokes.

...being Dominican we don't have.... when someone mentioned we represent Afro nothingness... I like that and I wrote it down. So no there was no sense of African identity growing. Growing up the only sense of African identity I had was in a negative form meaning insults or remarks from family members like cousins and stuff... like that's when I know I am Black. They would joke like “don't jump



in the pool with your hair.” Little jokes like that, like little jokes like *negrito*... Little, little things where you internalize it but that is the only thing about Blackness that you know.

Angelo experienced one of the worst types of rejection within his own family unit. He internalized the rejection and began to reject himself. He could not make sense of why he looked as he did when everyone else in his family was better looking. These were issues that he struggled with throughout his childhood and early adult years.

Participants talked about the importance of language and hidden definitions within commonly used words. Even when words are translated from English to Spanish, they lose a historical component attached to the meaning and intention of that word. For example, Angelo mentioned the word *negrito*, literally translates into [little Black man] not only is it diminutive but it is also emasculating. The word has a long history of being utilized in the Latina/o community to insult a person or to highlight their deviation from the norm of *mestizaje*. Angelo felt estranged within his own family since everyone else presented as *mestiza/os*. They found it important to remind Angelo of his phenotypic difference and the prominence of his undesirable traits – those of African lineage. Yet, it was always under the guise of loving jokes and hidden meanings within common language.

Angelo’s father was about the same complexion as he but “he was the one with the most [racist] jokes.” Yet, the only difference between the two of them was their hair type. Angelo has “kinky hair” while his father has curly soft hair. That subtle difference provided the father with enough advantage over his son to make fun of his Blackness. The racist jokes, constant rejection, and the endless “no, you can’t really be Dominican,”

remarks by other Latina/os led Angelo to overcome by “learning to love himself.” Similarly, many of the participants confronted the rejection they encountered through embracing their identity, which had been systematically denied – the Afro side. Skin color and phenotype were not the only factors that lead to the isolation of AfroLatina/os. All participants mentioned the “kinkiness” of their hair playing a primary role in how “African” others perceived them to be – and by extension the degree of their rejection. The “good hair versus bad hair” standard is a binary often associated with women but almost all men in the study talked about the importance their hair has played in their lives.

Chrishtian grew up in the Dominican Republic, he experienced partial rejection from other Dominicans due to his hair texture. Growing up “they [my friends] used to straighten their hair, and if you had hair like me, that’s really kinky you usually shave it off (laugh).” Even the males felt forced to straighten or shave their hair in order to fit in with the other students. Hair seems to be utilized as one of the clearest indicators of African lineage, hence, if a person has kinky hair they cannot deny that aspect of their lineage. Chrishtian does not have prominent African features, yet his hair texture and medium-dark skin tone lead him to experience discrimination from other classmates.

I was bullied in middle school and during my freshman and sophomore year in high school. My classmates used to call my hair *pimiento* or *canela*, means it is like kinky hair. It is annoying, but you have to laugh it off.

Chrishtian adopted “laughing it off” as a coping mechanism. He did not go in depth in terms of how he coped with it on a day-to-day basis but most of his friends were not “*blancos*” [White], which minimized the emphasis on his hair. When Chrishtian

immigrated to the United States he noticed the rejection of Blackness was omnipresent but it took on a different form. In fact, the majority of participants talked about how they encountered rejection both in Latin American countries as well as in the United States but there were subtle differences.

Natalia's mother self identifies as AfroColombian, she was born in Providencia de Santa Catalina, an island off the coast of Colombia with a predominant Black population. Growing up they would visit Colombia where Natalia witnessed first hand the discrimination AfroColombians encounter. In Providencia de Santa Catalina "most people look Black and Columbia has done its best to limit the identity of Black people." She talked about how Black people have been marginalized in Colombian society and pushed to live on three main islands. AfroColombians have been pushed so deeply into invisibility that many Colombians do not even know they exist. "The AfroColombian within the mainland has definitely been kept down and a lot of people don't even know there are Black people in Columbia." They are mostly kept out of the formal sectors of society and make a living selling fish and trading goods. There are negative social stigmas attached to being Black in Colombia, the most dominant being if you are Black you are not intellectually capable of contributing to society. Their oppression in Colombian society is upheld by the justification that they are not capable of working in the formal sectors. As such, their poverty is a direct consequence of their inferiority, and thus, not worthy of being considered Colombian.

Although all participants experienced different forms of prejudice, they all agree it had to do with the fact that they are AfroLatina/os. They are the *Malinali Tenepat* of

the Latina/o community. Their Blackness does not allow their full integration and/or acceptance as Latina/os. Most students have a panethnic identity that they cherish despite the ill treatment they have experienced. Unfortunately, many of them have experienced the same degree of rejection with their families. They all have withstood the rejection of their Blackness in multiple forms. Nonetheless, all participants reported developing a better sense of identity as a consequence of being harassed and rejected. They were almost forced to do so since the alternative would thrust them into self-hatred.

**Black is Bad.** A dominant theme that stood out across interviews was that anyone who was Black automatically became a bad person. Black and bad almost always were spoken together, or at least, it was stated that by assumption Black was bad. There seemed to be an unspoken understanding that being called Haitian was a big insult. By calling someone Haitian there is an implied (or very explicit) statement of inferiority. There is an assumption that all Haitians are darker than any other Latina/os. Consequently, if you are called Haitian you are being called Black and being insulted. During the focus group Chrishtian mentioned, “my cousin, who I used to live with, he is a lot darker, darker than all of us and between all the cousins there was a joke about him being Haitian.” When he mentioned that everyone in the focus group agreed and laughed. He went on to explain, “those jokes those comments of ‘oh you are Haitian’ like if you get called Haitian it is kind a like calling you names or something.” Again, those in the focus group agreed. You do not want to be called Haitian because that means you are Black and that is not good.

While some flee the possibility of being called Haitian due to their dark skin, others like A are searching for acknowledgement within the Black community. A is a

light skinned man who has been denied the opportunity to claim his Black identity because he physically appears “White.” A grew up in Miami, “my African-American peers, specifically, didn’t identify me as Black or Spanish either, you are Black or you are White so they identified me as White.” While he admits he has struggled with not being able to call himself Black, he also acknowledges there are social benefits associated with not being Black.

I know I am giving up a part of me and I am almost, well not forced but kind of compelled because out of fear of the consequences, or the stigma that is attached to being dark skinned which is ridiculous but it’s it’s the nature of the beast.

He talked about having internal dialogues and feeling guilty about not identifying as Black but because he had previously been incarcerated, he realizes it is best for him to take advantage of his skin color – reporting White as his race. A admits that if he were dark-skinned, then maybe he would feel differently. Nonetheless, the constant messaging he has gotten throughout his life was that Black is bad. “I think that there is a stigma with being dark colored and I actually take advantage of identifying as White.” A ultimately decided to just accept the benefits associated with his skin color since it was too exhausting negotiating acceptance into a group that is so disadvantaged in society.

During the focus group, participants were extremely honest and open about their personal stories. Destiny shared how difficult it was for her to grow up with a single-mother who could not come to terms with the fact she had given birth to dark-skinned children. Her mother began relaxing Destiny’s hair when she was only six years old. When Destiny was in high school she decided that she no longer wanted to perm her hair and her mother was not happy.

My mom did not want me to stop relaxing my hair because she [thought] I would look ugly or I would look Black. ‘No, no, you are going... oh my God people are really going to.... Oh my God.’ She just didn’t want people to see me as another Black girl. I guess you know, and for me it was just like well this is who I am and you are going to have to accept that. I think that was part of her [insecurities] because she has really curly soft hair but I think it is part of something inside of her that she cannot accept that part of herself. So she doesn’t really want us to accept it [being Black] but at the end of the day my father is a dark skinned Dominican, you knew who you were, you know who you fell in love with. So it is like, you can’t get upset if we have [African] features that you to this day cannot come to terms with so it was hard.

Destiny did not necessarily feel rejected by her mom but she did grow up with constant messaging that being Black was a bad thing. Her mother did whatever she could to minimize any connection to her Blackness. Destiny felt it was possible her mother was rejecting any aspect that reminded her of her father, by way of correlating Blackness to loss and negativity. It was common for women in her circle to spend hours on end in the salon relaxing their hair. It had become part of their culture, almost mundane. It is possible her mother did not realize the impact it was having on Destiny. Regardless of the reasoning, there was a clear message that being Black was bad and it was to be escaped.

When participants started talking about their panethnic experiences, they agreed being both Black and Latina/o was like having multiple strikes against them. It did not matter if they were in the United States or elsewhere. They still had to navigate cultural and societal norms that do not acknowledge their combined identities. David explains,

[being] AfroLatino it is two strikes against you because you are Black and that means you are less than White, and you are Latino and that means you’re less than White, and the combination of both that makes you twice is bad.

David is an adult learner. He had originally enrolled at Schomburg College at a traditional age but he became a father and it was increasingly difficult to balance all his

responsibilities. He decided to drop out until he could return and fully focus on his education. During his time in the workforce he experienced a number of situations that verified he had “two strikes against” him. Nonetheless, his years of wisdom have taught him to look beyond the barriers and negative stereotypes, “I am an individual who is greater than the stereotypes.” He acknowledged at one point it was difficult for him but he eventually learned to disregard all the negativity and focus on himself.

Participants agreed they consistently received messaging from their family members and society at large that Blackness is not only bad but also ugly. Angelo is the darkest one in his family and also has prominent African features – which made him the joke of the family throughout his childhood. Early on he “learned” his skin color and African features were neither desirable nor accepted in the Latina/o community.

We live in a world where Black is ugly where dark is ugly. So if you are a kid who always has to deal with that growing up, if your parents always said something to you along those lines it will be a lot more hurtful... They [society] want you to learn and know that Black is ugly, that Brown is ugly, so I had to look at myself and ask why.

Not only was he asking why Black was considered ugly, he was also asking why he had been “chosen” to be Black. At first he found great weakness in his color. Even though he was born and raised in the Bronx, which is very diverse, his family fostered an environment where he felt rejected. As he got older Angelo developed his own culture, which was a mixture of hip-hop, Dominican, and the Bronx. Not only did it allow him to forge his own identity but it also helped him feel validated. Yet, he was constantly reminded he was not fully Dominican because he was too dark. Thus, he selected pieces of hip-hop, the Bronx, and Dominican culture in order to fill the gaps each had.

When Angelo would visit family in the Dominican Republic he got the same messages about the undesirability of his dark skin. In fact, they do not consider him Dominican at all. They see him as an outsider, even within his family, he is seen as an American. Not just because he was born in the U. S. but also because of his “mannerisms, the way I speaks, the way I carry myself, and the way I look.” Participants agree that it is not just skin tone gradient that is utilized in determining how Latina/o one is but rather an amalgamation of factors. It can be mannerisms, hair type, facial features, body type, and/or language. However, during the focus group they unanimously agreed with Angelo when he said, “the darker you are the more reminders of your Africanness but not from yourself from the outside.” The messaging was the same across the board, the darker you are, the more African you are perceived, and the more rejection you will endure. The degree of rejection varies and the lines are blurred when different factors are accounted for but Blackness is seen as bad both in the United States and Latin America.

**Colonization of Identity.** To colonize means to appropriate or to establish control over an area. In this context, the colonization of identity refers to the appropriation and control over the combined identity of Black and Latina/o. All participants reported acknowledging they were a rich mixture of African, Indigenous, and/or European but more often than not Latina/os opted to reject their African ancestry. With the majority of Latina/os seeing themselves as *mestizo*, anyone who appeared to have prominent African features encountered difficulties in being accepted as Latina/o. The experience was the same with African Americans and/or other racial Blacks in the United States. Participants



reported their ability to claim their own identity was removed. They were often forced to decide between one or the other – either Black or Latina/os.

Rigo was born in the Midwest to a Dominican mother and an African-American father from Mississippi. During the interviews Rigo shared a number of family stories that highlight the colonization of identity, particularly the stories of his mom and sisters. In his perspective, they had to overcome more barriers than just skin color. The standards of beauty played a detrimental factor in the experiences of the AfroLatina women in his life. He explained that growing up in the “projects” in the Midwest all he had around him were “poor Whites but mostly poor Blacks” he knew he was not White so by default he was Black.

I am proud of being both [Dominican and African American] but it took me some time to really just wrap my brain around accepting both parts of myself... not that I denied one part of myself... But if I was difficult, within school like in grade school, and things like that in the Midwest I did not know others like me. My friends didn't speak Spanish or anything and others were not like me... you know they [African Americans] gave my sisters a hard time because... yes, my sisters... yes, they had light skin and beautiful brown eyes and long beautiful flowing hair so the girls would give them a hard time... like... “who do you think you are you think you are cute?” and they would get into fights and pull their hair. They just had a thing against us. I was always protective of my sisters you know but it was just hard. The projects are hard... my mother struggled a lot which was hard and I feel bad about that because being here [U.S] she tries to fit in. She had long beautiful hair and light eyes and everything like that and I came home and she had chopped all her hair off and had gotten one of the styles like the Black women have, she wanted to fit in... Even now it's really bad. Like when you are filling out an application online and you don't have that option either, just Latino or Black, or Black and non-Latino, and that just annoys me. I am just like ok it just shows that there is no understanding there.

Rigo grew up in the Midwest where the Dominican population was very small. His mother's insecurities about her own identity made it difficult for Rigo to “accept both

parts” of his identity. Although he grew up around other African-Americans, and they considered him to be Black, he could not exhibit pride of his Dominican side. As soon as he would speak Spanish or take pride in his AfroLatinidad, he was automatically beat up or “threatened to not try to be different or better than them.” Rigo’s younger brothers “identified only as Black and really denied their Dominican side because of the stigmas. Sadly.” Despite the bullying and harassment Rigo endured he decided that acknowledging his identities was more important than the temporary social discomforts. Rigo shared that when he moved to New York City he was exposed to the “beautiful treasure” of his Dominican identity.

Rigo withstood childhood harassment and bullying because he embraced his AfroLatinidad. In his case, the colonization of his identity was more limited by his geographic location than his physical appearance. In Sally’s case, her physical appearance was the primary factor in her inability to self-identify as an AfroLatina. Despite her growing up in the City, which is considered extremely diverse and heterogeneous, she encountered constant rejection from her Latina peers.

When I was younger I used to be the only dark skinned female in my class. The rest of my classmates were either predominately Puerto Rican, predominately Mexican, and predominately something else. Something specific but I was possibly the only mixed one in the group. I did identify with Latinas when necessary, so if there was a situation that arose it would come up about how I identified, but I was also shunt for it because of my color because I am dark. A lot of them were really light skin Puerto Ricans with the long straight hair and they spoke Spanish. I didn’t so I couldn’t identify with them.

When I prompted her to speak about her experiences with African American friends, she said they did not have a problem with her “being Black.” Once again, it was not just her

dark skin and prominent African features that excluded her from the Latina group, Sally did not speak Spanish, which all the other Latina/o kids spoke during recess and lunch. She acknowledges not being able to speak Spanish was a minor factor but still feels strongly that if she were light skinned, her *Latinidad* would not have been an issue. Language has emerged as a definitive factor in gaining acceptance into the Latina/o community. Sally mentioned she simply “couldn’t identify with them” there was no common culture between them other than their parent’s lineage. If she could speak Spanish then maybe her acceptance would have been seamless but she still seemed a bit unsure if she would ever be fully accepted.

The majority of participants discussed having difficulty in defining or establishing strong faith in their AfroLatina/o identity. Most of them had to overcome negative perceptions about either of their identities but their combination made it even more difficult. Nonetheless, they all reflect on those negative experiences in order to construct and mold their own identity and self worth. Sally reflected on her childhood,

That [rejection] never stopped me from changing who I knew I was. I think it’s, unfortunately the experience would have been better [if I was light skinned] I would have fit in more but I don’t think I would have been the person I am today. I think it’s the best person that I could possibly be.

In many aspects Sally does resent her exclusion from the Latina/o kids. Nonetheless, she still feels she developed meaningful and lasting friendships with others who shared similar values to her own. She has coped with her rejection by adopting an indifferent attitude. Sally mentioned she identified more as mixed race and not so much Latina or Black. When I pressed her to elaborate she mentioned there were many negative

assumptions attached to Blacks. She did not fit into the “stereotypical Black profile” and it was just easier for her to identify as mixed. Like Sally, other participants experienced the colonization of identity because they did not speak the language.

Rafael was born and raised in the Bronx. His biological father holds all connections to his “Afro” side but he was never part of Rafael’s life. His mother never taught him how to speak Spanish so Rafael found himself needing to justify his “lack of fitting in” with both groups. On the one side, he does not speak Spanish and that is “the emblem of authenticity” in the Latina/o community. Growing up he was not seen as a Latino because he lacked the “tongue.” On the flipside, he was not seen as Black because his only connection to his “Afro” ancestry was removed when his “father abandoned” his family. Growing up Rafael consistently struggled with his identity. He shared feeling perplexed about where he fit in and how to identify. Although he cannot deny his African lineage he has no context of his Afrolineage since his father is not present.

Rafael did not know how to make sense of his culture, family ancestry, and genetic makeup. Not being able to speak Spanish posed the biggest barrier for him.

I feel that in a way it takes away from that authentic... authenticity of being Spanish cuz... one I have been interviewed for a job and the first question was do you speak Spanish? Are you bilingual? And when I say no they pause for a second because it kinda, it takes them back a bit. They assume that it’s a given, you know, they hear your name called, they see your last name, they see you raise your hand, when the *Español* name origin comes out and immediately they have this notion in their head that you are from this side of the equator. That you have this story and this background, and all these associations in their mind, they think your tongue belongs to that. But really you know my tongue originated at [Chestnut East 104<sup>th</sup>]. Down the block, on the basketball court you know. From the culture that is here in the Bronx, it wasn’t from over there or from where you think I am from it was here... from the Bronx.

Much of his identity confusion arises from how others perceive him, people often speak Spanish to him and he cannot reply. They automatically dismiss him as not being Latino. They assume if he cannot communicate with them in Spanish then somehow he cannot be included within the Latina/o community. Unfortunately, his mother did not teach the family Spanish because she has worked three jobs for as long as he can remember. Rafael gets sentimental when speaking about the opportunities lost with the inability to speak Spanish. Not only has it limited his ability to gain employment but he also feels it has closed the door on an important aspect of his identity.

Many study participants reported a shared cultural identification with their parents but it was not exactly in entire alignment. Participants who were born and raised in the United States reported having a hybrid cultural identity, in some cases it was borough bound – specifically the Bronx. David states, “I don’t really identify just as a Dominican per se... before anything else I am from the Bronx. I am the Bronx. Bronxite first, New Yorker second, American third.” Along that sentiment Rafael adds, “I would identify myself as a Bronx native I believe the Bronx has such a, it is not just a geographic location, it’s a certain you know, I believe it holds a different culture.” Yet, those identities are not recognized as acceptable underneath the U. S. ethnic, racial, and cultural categories. In some regards, the ability to self-identify as something other than what has already been deemed appropriate further disenfranchises those who do not fit perfectly within the recognized categories.

Some students shared feeling perplexed about how they fit within the delicate fabric of race relations in the United States. They understand they may physically appear

Black but there is a history that needs to be recognized. African-Americans have a different history in the United States than most AfroLatina/os. Their Black identity has a panethnic component, which is strictly bound to colonial racial mixture and *mestizo* identity. Damian was born in the United States to Dominican parents. Although he was not born in the Dominican Republic he knows part of his history and culture is also his by way his parents.

Being an [Afro]Latino [in the U.S] it's almost like you can't really call yourself Black because African-Americans have their own history that is separate... and that is you have to understand it, there is a separation and... you can't claim something that is not necessarily yours. It's like saying yes we are all Black. Yeah, but that... the Diaspora aspect is there but not the history. I think for Latinos it's like you know I was born here and I feel like I should have claim to some of that history because I have grown up here, everything that I have is here and the reality is that it's not... and so you... I have also at least a lot of Afro Latinos grow up with their parents' culture. You know where that came from the Islands or whatever or South America. Wherever that was so I think it does, it gives you this sense of re-having to identify. Am I, am I Latino? Am I Black? Or how does each of those come together?

In some aspects Damian understands the intricacies that arise when history is not acknowledged. For him it is extremely important to identify as Black but to also recognize that while he does belong to the African Diaspora, he cannot claim the African-American experience as his own. When I asked him to clarify what aspects of U. S. culture he can claim, he stated that the American culture is different. Nonetheless, he understands that African-Americans have encountered much oppression and discrimination. Damian does not see it appropriate to claim a painful history that he has no connection with other than being born in the geographic location where the injustice was perpetrated.

Damian is a very poised young man. Growing up he had many questions about why he looked the way he looked, why race was never talked about in his family, and why Dominicans took more claim to their Spanish roots than their African ancestry. Like other participants, those unanswered questions led Damian to become a self-educated historian. Throughout the interview he talked about the importance of understanding and acknowledging how history continues to impact contemporary notions of AfroLatinidad. When he was in high school most insecurities and identity search surfaced, living in the borderlands between home, school, and society was difficult. All three of those spaces were filled with different groups of people, at home he spoke Spanish and it was all about being Dominican. At school, he went to a very mixed school so there was no clear distinction between cultures or ethnicities. His friends were all non-Latino Caribbean kids from Jamaica, Trinidad, and Dominica. The constant border crossing compelled him to educate himself on “what I was and where I came from.” The inner-questioning Damian experienced was something all participants could relate to and underwent themselves.

Participants who had a strong panethnic identity, meaning they were born and/or raised in a Latin American country, reported having experienced more rigorous standards of Blackness and Latinidad. Regardless of location there was a negative perception about being Black and the combination of being both Black and Latina/o complicated matters in the United States. In some aspects they felt that in Latin America there was no secretive exclusion of an individual based on their phenotype. Although prejudice was more blatant in Latin America, there were clear social parameters. In the United States, participants felt the lines were more blurred. Christian explains,

A lot of people will call you names and all this stuff and it happens everywhere. Even in DR [Dominican Republic] where there's a lot of Black people. If you are darker than the status quo you are too dark for the Dominican Republic, you will be called names. You can have Blackness and you can be Black but not too Black. So a lot of people are... in a contention between being a Latino and how Black they can be. How far can you go in your Latinoness and being Black? If I am mixed can I still be Latino? In reality, we talk about Latinos are a mixed society and people who are extremely, or pure Black, sometimes they are look down on because ... you could be Black, you can be whatever but you cannot be too much Black. If you are too White, you are a gringo and if you are too Black you get dismissed really quick. Here [in the U. S.] you don't know why they discriminate or when they discriminate. It's hidden.

The overarching theme is that Blackness as a whole is not welcomed nor accepted regardless of where the participants find themselves. In Latin American countries there are clear guidelines to follow in order to avoid being seen as an outsider. Christhian mentioned that it was ok to “be Black but not too Black,” the Blackness he was talking about is not just physical appearance but also pride in their African ancestry. In order to be seen as a Dominican, there is an unspoken rule that they must embrace the “mixed” identity – the *mestizo* identity and to not celebrate too loudly their African lineage.

In the United States discrimination is more covert, that is, Christhian reported not knowing when he is being discriminated against due to being Black. He feels being the combination of an immigrant, Latino, and Black ultimately places him at a larger disadvantage than most of his other AfroLatina/o peers. Nonetheless, the resounding theme throughout interviews was that participants could not identify as they felt appropriate through self-identification. Rather they were forced to identify within the confines of what was already prescribed in society. It was complex all around. Those who were born in the United States felt they could not fully claim Blackness because there



was a historical component attached to the experiences of Blacks in the United States. Those who were born in Latin America experienced a sort of panethnic oppression, they had been conditioned to not identify as Black in their country of origin, but in the United States if they did not identify as Black they somehow were foregoing their African ancestry. Overall, the impact was the same: they could not self-identify. They are almost forced to conform to whatever standards are set in place – even though they are exclusionary and prejudiced.

### ***Una Nueva Raza Aun Más Cósmica***

Anzaldúa (2007) illuminates deep connections and applies great significance to the prehistoric past. She investigates the profound cultural and racial shifts that emerged from the marriage between colonizers and Indigenous peoples of the Americas. It gave birth to *mestizaje*, *La Mestiza*, a new *raza*, a new race of people. She relies heavily on the Indio-Spanish (conquistador) hybrid identity in her depictions about the new *mestizaje*, leaving out the Black African integration.

The *mestizo* who were genetically equipped to survive small pox, measles, and typhus... founded a new hybrid race and inherited Central and South America. *En 1521 nació una nueva raza, el mestizo, el mexicano* (people of mixed Indian and Spanish blood), a race that had never existed before. Chicanos, Mexican-Americans, are the offspring of those first meetings. (Anzaldúa, p. 27)

The cultural and genetic clash between the two peoples gave birth to modern day Latina/os. A marriage between a very painful history, racial mixing, and injustice gave birth to *mestiza/os*. Yet, *mestizaje* leaves out African ancestry. By extending Anzaldúa's *nuevo mestizaje* to include and acknowledge the historically denied African lineage, the *raza cósmica* has been extended to be even more cosmic - *aun más cósmica*.

All study participants agreed they are comprised of a rich mixture of cultures, races, and ethnicity. Some relied more heavily on the European/Spanish side while others decisively aligned themselves with their Indigenous lineage. The *raza cósmica* was the creative genius of José Vasconcelos (1966) but there was a major flaw, his thesis asserted the races would mix but only the best qualities of each would persist. That meant the actual “breeding out” of the undesirable. The *raza cósmica* did not include African features, lineage, or genetics. In this section, participants reclaim their rightful place among *mestizaje* and expand la *raza cósmica* to be what I call *aun más cósmica* – even more cosmic – through the celebration of their African lineage.

***Una nueva mescla: Colonial, Indigenous, and African.*** A new mixture of colonial, Indigenous, and African ancestry is how most participants identified themselves, while some felt that they were more mixed than anything, they recognized the acts of history that led to their genetic makeup. In attempting to understand who they were and where they came from, they had more questions than answers. Some felt that if they were to identify a certain way, they were somehow giving up another aspect of their identity, history, and genetic makeup. Many participants grew up in homes where family members consistently reminded them they were mixed, mulatto, or simply adopted their nation of origin as an identifier. Either way the result was the same, shunning their African lineage. David mentioned the difficulties he has encountered in attempting to understand who he is:

Racially.... That is one that I really, really, really, have difficulty with because racially I think that we are all made up of different components. Like my mother's side of the family is dark skinned, dark skinned, and by that I mean my mother's

father was Taino, you know, Indigenous Taino to the Dominican Republic my mother's family was descendent of the Yoruba... she was much darker complected and she had more of the African facial features as opposed to my grandfather who had more of the Taino facial features. On my father side of the family, my father side of the family... is also mixed it is mixed of Taino and it is also mixed with European Spanish. So with all of those racial make ups I know I have Euro-Spanish in me, I have Indigenous Taino, and I have African Yoruba which is in my physical genetic makeup. So racially I don't really, I don't really, identify I try not to, I try not to identify racially because how do you, how do you define that you are....aaahhhhhh genetically a mutt if that makes any sense?

There is a clear disconnection between socially ascribed categories and how David self-identifies. He recognizes his lineage extends further than his parents into a complicated history of colonization. It is not a matter of nation of origin but rather a rich historical makeup that creates his genetic lineage. He cannot possibly identify as only one when he is a mixture of Indigenous from Dominican Republic, Indigenous from the continent of Africa, and Spanish. The best way he could describe his genetic makeup is by recognizing that he is a "mutt," a unique combination of many peoples from across the world.

Anzaldúa (2007) highlights the importance of recognizing the overlooked and rejected Indigenous past. The participants not only recognize their Indigenous ancestry but also recognize their African lineage. This aspect of their *mestiza/o* identity is often overlooked in Latina/o spaces. They recognize they are a mixture of the races, making them even more than just *mestiza/o* – even more cosmic than their *mestiza/o* counterparts. David adds, "we are all new, that combination made something new, and there is a greater identification in the new thing than the old thing." They feel more connected, more inclusive, when recognized as something new. The *mestiza/o* identity overlooks that

new component so for them rather than falling within the ethnic category of Latina/o they have decided to simply not conform. This sentiment of being something new is demonstrated on how they self-identify culturally, racially, and ethnically (see Table 5.1).

Their self-identification with something new is not a surprising discovery given the importance phenotype played in their negotiation of in-group membership. For example, participants shared that it is OK to slightly deviate from the stereotypical Latina/o. However, you cannot deviate too much because if you do then you will fall beyond the parameters of acceptability. Even though A physically presents White, he has seen first hand the discrimination dark skinned Latina/os encounter within the Latina/o community.

There is point where you are too dark to be Spanish looking and you just look Black, like African Black. Then, now it's like 'wait a minute this guy is way too dark he has too much Black in him he is not really an authentic Latino.' I think a lot of people see it that way... they want to preserve that identity of a mixture as opposed to being too much on the dark-side.

The idea of being a racial mixture has permeated and most Latina/os seem to accept that genetic aspect, but phenotype seems to be more strictly bound to certain confines. One cannot be too dark skinned because they will automatically be castigated into the undesirable category. The same sentiment dominates in Latin America. Natalia has traveled to Colombia a number of times and she has seen the rejection of AfroColombians and *Raizales*. At the same time, she has also seen a rise in pride from the *Raizal* people, who celebrate their mixed ancestry. "[These] people are proud of their mixed descent, they are of African, and White European, and Indigenous of the Americas. [Yet,] most people look Black. Columbia has done its best up until now

including now to limit the identity of Black people.” They find pride in their mixed ancestry despite being rejecting in Colombian society.

Overall, participants felt they were something more than just a mixture. They reported being proud of encompassing something new – distinct from *mestiza/os*. They did not want to claim one identity over another, and while some did highlight their European ancestry more than any other identity, they still reported a stronger connection to being something new. Angelo encountered mockery and rejection both within his household and society. He was constantly told he could not possibly be Latino given his physical appearance. He was often dismissed as an African American trying to act Latino. Nonetheless, he knows that he is more than just Black or Latino,

I think it is way more complicated than I am Black or my grandmother is White. So am I supposed to not include her in that? It never made any sense and the same thing the other way around... are you not supposed to include her, my White grandma my Black father? It doesn't make any sense you are what you are. Being that you are Dominican, or being that you are Mexican, you have the Indigenous bloodline in there, you have the European bloodline in there, and anything else that may have come along for any reason. You have that in there. I don't think it's important to say I am one more than the other.

Participants expressed their uneasiness with having to identify within prescribed racial and ethnic categories. They make no sense to them considering the historical racial mixture of Latina/os. What is even more perplexing, are the stereotypes and long held assumptions about race and ethnicity. Participants expressed being frustrated by having identities imposed upon them solely based on their physical appearance. They reported feeling robbed of the ability to self-identify with a genetic lineage that did not manifest itself through their phenotype. Just because they physically presented a certain way, does

not negate the fact they are their grandparents' descendants. Almost all participants accepted they were of Latina/o heritage but beyond a *mestiza/o* identity. Participants' experiences in the United States and abroad has taught them to celebrate and acknowledge a new identity beyond what has been traditionally accepted. They are *una raza aún mas cósmica*.

***El choque: Cultural Collision.*** Anzaldúa (2007) writes about the clash that occurs when different cultures, belief systems, and/or identities collide. The *choque* is a collision, it is chaos but it also had the potential to create something new. She writes, “cradled in one culture, sandwiched between two cultures, straddling all three cultures and their value systems, *la mestiza* undergoes a struggle of flesh, a struggle of borders, an inner war” (p. 100). Participants reported feeling perplexed about how to identity, were they really Latina/os? Were they American? They constantly crossed from one culture into another and back again – at times simultaneously split between them all. At home they were Latina/os, whatever nation of origin their parents claimed, with friends it also depended. Some had very diverse group of friends while others were managing jobs and would go to class and back home or straight to work. Nonetheless, they reported a constant clash between their different social and cultural groups.

Their constant identity negotiation was not solely physical but also emotional, psychological, and physiological. They experienced what Anzaldúa referred to as a constant cultural attack. The consequences of having to constantly shift identities or personalities in order to fit in to the space. Anzaldúa experienced it herself,

Commonly held belief of the white culture attack commonly held beliefs of the Mexican culture, and both attack commonly held beliefs of the Indigenous culture. Subconsciously, we see an attack on ourselves and our beliefs as a threat and we attempt to block with a counterstance. (p. 100)

Damian reported feeling like a mediator between African Americans, AfroLatina/os, and other non-U. S. Blacks. He shared the need for more information, a consciences of understanding how history influences identity, and social interactions. Damian has taken it upon himself to research the diversity of Blackness but he feels it should not be his responsibility to educate others. Places like the university and public education should embrace the responsibility of moving beyond a monoracial education.

Damian grew up in a very diverse community but all during his childhood friends were from Trinidad and Jamaica. It was with them that he realized he did not fit perfectly within any group. He had more in common with his neighborhood friends than he did at home or with other Dominicans. His curiosity of why that was led him to conduct his own research on the unique histories of his ancestors, Blacks in the United States, and Latina/o ethnicity.

In this sense the information I was mentioning was, or lack of, is I guess the emphasis on conversations around colonization. Slaves were brought over and that is key to understanding that, you know, yes that before them [the colonizers] there were people there [in the Americas]. There were Indigenous people there who were wiped out.... and so that kind of mixing in with the European in itself has in an instant made the culture where we are from. So it was kind of born out of that violence, out of that pain. We get where we are from through that, so I think none of that information is ever given. It's kinda like 'yeah, we are all people let's just parade together, they didn't care about race.' But it was so important back in the day, it was so important, like it is today.

He realized it was more complex than just saying his identities were a great mixture.

There was a very sad and difficult historical component, a component that is often left out

of the conversation, the ugliness of colonization. Damian talked about coming to the realization that the painful history of African Americans was not his own. Given that Latina/os endured similar conditions in Latin America he has grown sympathetic to African Americans, “defending” their history. Damian identified a big clash between the histories of Latina/os and African Americans but he realized this distinction carried direct ramifications for how he was viewed in U. S. society and by his family members.

Damian talked about the lack of information on AfroLatinidad. He feels the reason why there is lack of information is to keep African Americans and Latina/os at a constant clash. His goal is to create order out of chaos, the only way he sees this happening is through the unification of peoples of colors in the United States. Angelo shares a similar perspective. He, too, identified a gap in what was being taught in school and how that left out the histories of AfroLatina/os. Even the idea of a mixed Latina/o American community was excluded from the textbooks but it did not stop him from searching. Angelo talks about the moment when he realized the colonization was not as nice as it had been depicted by his family and at school. “It blew my mind, like this is who we are. They don’t teach us this... like where I got my color, no one talks about it.” Angelo is the darkest in his family and that led him to be the target of all racist jokes. Since the joking happened at home it was dismissed as non-violent verbal attacks. The reality is Angelo began to resent the jokes, his family members, and himself.

The more Angelo read, the more he realized there was a historical component to the jokes, to the clash of cultures within his own home. He began to understand there was a deeper reason for the lack of information. His goal was to learn about the historical



occurrences that lead to him looking the way he does. He wanted to understand why he was so dark and the rest of his family members were lighter skinned mestiza/os.

I look at the macrocosm of human history. I look at how people migrate and how they blend into each other and the time that it takes to do so. This is one of the largest migrations and ships in human history that has occurred... ever! I am talking about the post Columbus age like they moved and made people that did not exist before. But that is not the first time that it ever happened, there have been other wars, from the Dacian going to the Congo, there has always been wars that obliterated a whole people. But people didn't die people... kind of shift into... and blend into the next form... by making new people. Mixing language that's how many languages are born. So right now I believe that, that is the process that we are in as Latinos and I believe there needs to be subsections. Like I think I hit on this before we had the Caribbean side which is more African descendent, well African and Spaniard, and then you have the mainland which is more Indigenous European descendent but I figured that those two together make a core now... even though the racial makeup between those subsections are slightly different they still have a lot of the same components. A common language, on top of the common language we have a common heritage, culture, well not common culture... but you know we have a lot of similarities. I figure that brings us together more than not. I think that, that is enough, enough time aside, 500 years past so that those two subsections could be considered separate from let's say European or African. That's why I believe that ethnicity and race are really the same thing but I think we are stuck on Black and Whites that they still try to match ethnicity into their preconceived notion's of race.

It was not until he got older that he finally began to understand the historical and contemporary clash between cultures, peoples, and societies lead to a new reality, a new people. Angelo began to take pride in his identities. He was no longer ashamed or resentful for the way he looked. He understood he was part of something new and complex. He also began to reject the notion of race and ethnicity as markers for identification. In fact, most participants felt the contemporary racial and ethnic categories were inadequate.

Christhian has very strong cultural and familial ties to the Dominican Republic. Since he recently immigrated much of his understanding of race and ethnicity is based on Dominican social standards. He describes a bigger clash between U. S. society and the Dominican Republic.

To me Latino is a U.S. phenomenon. Outside the U.S. people don't say they are Latino they just say their nationality. Dominican, Cuban or Brazilian. And Hispanic is more like in the Caribbean... I mean the Hispanola is the Island of Haiti and Dominican Republic. So I guess when people are over there they say they are Hispanic but Latino I think is a U.S. thing... you know to me.

In this case, the *choque* occurs in the ethnic labeling, which tends to change based on geographic location. His primary self-identification is Dominican of African descent, clearly he does not identify within the confines of U. S. racial and ethnic standards. Similar to Damian and Angelo, Christhian has conducted personal searches to understand how his identities came about. He has a different perspective that is more heavily influenced by his panethnic identity. He does not see himself as an American, in fact, he sees himself as different than most Dominican-Americans. The *choques* Christhian had to overcome were many: nation of origin, self-identification, language, immigrant status, and AfroLatinidad. Nonetheless, his friends on campus consist of other international students from Brazil, immigrants, and AfroLatina/os who celebrated their AfroLatinidad. The later group seems to be a very small and almost nonexistent on campus.

David shared a similar sentiment to Christhian, his non-traditional age provided him with some perspective in understanding racial and ethnic categorizations. Like Christhian, he did not like associating himself with other Dominican-Americans but it was for a different reason. He did not like the reputation and negative stereotypes that

circulated about Dominicans in the Bronx. Since David was the first in his family to be born in the United States, his particular distinction of being *el Americano* stuck to his psyche. He did not particularly feel like he was better than other Dominicans but he felt the distinction of being an American provided him with an obligation to take advantage of the opportunities presented to him through his birthright citizenship. Nonetheless, he feels race and ethnic categories overlook the uniqueness and individuality of humans.

I think when people use the terms Latino and Hispanic. I see it as categories... and ummm categories are made to keep statistics. It has nothing to do with people. Nothing to do with who we are as individuals. It has nothing to do with how we identify, our culture because if our culture didn't have a specific name, it would still be our culture. So why do we have to categorize it by calling it Hispanic or Latino? Or Cari-Cubano.. or *lo que sea*? You know? Giving it any type of Hispanic nationality, does that really matter to who we really are? I am Dominican, my parents are Dominican. I was born here. I go to the opera twice a year. I don't know any other Dominican who goes to the Opera. I don't look at it as a Dominican going to the Opera twice a year. I look at it as me going to the opera twice a year. Like anybody else. Does it matter that I am a Hispanic that goes to the opera? Why do we have categories?

David feels that the categories by default lead to overgeneralizations of people. The danger lies in the stereotypes that are fabricated and adopted as facts by most. He does not see the need to categorize individuals into boxes. He thinks of it as a way to keep statistic, which overwhelmingly overlook the unique experiences and humanity of people. Because David was given the unique distinction of being *el Americano* in his family, he was automatically considered to be different than the rest of them. That designation automatically complicated his self-identification. In addition, he loves the opera but is often ridiculed because he goes twice a year. He mentioned the teasing usually comes

from other Dominicans who do not value that form of art. The categorization and ethnic designations of people lead to stereotypes and he wants no part in it.

*El choque*, the cultural collision, happens when participants no longer conformed to U. S. racial or ethnic standards. Out of the chaos and discontent with over-generalizations born out of stereotypes, they decided rather than allowing for others to tell them who they were, they would simply create their own identity. The *choque* formed something new, after they were able to overcome the messiness of defining their own identity – they eventually decided it would be easier to adopt a new identity. Most participants talked about coming to this realization was painful and filled with anguish, but ultimately led them to a sort of liberation.

*Despojando, desgranando, y quitando paja*. Anzaldúa (2007) embarked on a personal mission to understand who she was by forging a new identity, that of *la mestiza*. In the process she had to take inventory of which identities helped her and which held her down. She cleaned house through internal dialogue, which aimed at understanding who she really was rather than who others wanted her to be.

*Despojando, desgranando, quitando paja*. Just what did she inherit from her ancestors? This weight on her back – which is the baggage from the Indian mother, which the baggage from the Spanish father, which the baggage from the Anglo? *Pero es difícil* differentiating between *lo heredado, lo adquirido, lo impuesto...* This step is a conscious rupture with all oppressive traditions of all cultures and religions. She communicates that rupture, documents the struggle. She reinterprets history and, using new symbols, she shapes new myths. (p. 104)

Cleaning house and ridding oneself of all negativity was her mission. Anzaldúa attempts to identify what exactly she inherited, what was acquired, and what was imposed upon her. The process of self discovery is difficult and painful but once all the

unnecessary is forgone, one is left with the ability to re-construct and rebuild. Most participants underwent a very similar process. After encountering rejection, hostility, and even bullying due to their phenotype, they began a long process of recovery and re-identification. The first step included cleaning house, identifying what was useful for them, and what was hindering their development. The majority of them embarked on an information search quest. They wanted to understand why it was they looked the way they did, how historical occurrences contributed to their phenotype, and why Blackness was undesirable. Regardless of what path they took, all agree they comprise a great mixture – a synthesis of cultures, histories, and a genetic amalgamation from all over the world.

Nonetheless, with that great mixture also comes great struggle. Angelo shared when he was younger he did not understand why he looked different than his other siblings. Why was it he who had inherited the prominent African features? In many ways he was rejected because of his phenotype, his physical features, and "kinky" hair – all of which attributed to a difficult and painful childhood. Yet, Angelo found empowerment and self-affirmation when he began to read about the colonial history of the Dominican Republic. He understood his genetic makeup and physical features were the direct result of a complex history.

...that kind of mixing in with the European in itself has, in an instant, made the culture where we are from [Dominican Republic]. So it was kind of born out of that violence out of that pain that we get where we are from and who we are. So I think none of that information is ever given it's kind a like yeah we are people just paraded together they didn't care about race. It was so important back in the day, it was so important like it is today.

Angelo decided there first needs to be an acknowledgment that Latina/os are comprised of a mixture – a mixture born out of violence and pain but nonetheless a mixture. He decided to break from the false assumption that race does not matter. He is *despojando* an assumption that leads to an oversight of the impact forced racial classifications have on individuals. He calls for more information in the classroom through the incorporation of a more comprehensive academic curriculum. Even if his family members did not have access to that information, his childhood would have been easier if his educational institutions taught a more comprehensive world history that embraced racial and ethnic diversity throughout the curriculum.

The problem is not germane to the United States. Participants who grew up in Latin American countries expressed a similar experience. Pao grew up in Honduras where she encountered discrimination and humiliation because of her dark skin. The history books failed to acknowledge the rich African lineage throughout Latin America. As a result, all Garifunas endure second-class citizenship in Honduras. Pao decided her rejection from the Latina/o community was too traumatic and painful. She coped with it in her own way, by no longer claiming the Latina/o identity and embracing Blackness. In many ways she did what had been done to her – rejecting what was seen as undesirable. When she talked about her lack of affinity towards the Latina/o identity, she felt a need to justify herself,

Deeply I know that I should [identify as Latina] because like when you see our history you see that we are more Indian than African but ummmmm I like more to be called African than Hispanic (happy sigh). I just don't consider myself Hispanic.

Like Angelo, Pao acknowledges she is the composition of a genetic mixture that is deeply embedded in Latin American history, but given the amount of bullying she encountered at a young age, she simply decided that for her, the way she would clean house and rid herself of excess luggage, was simply not identifying as Latina. Unlike Angelo, Pao did not conduct personal research. She simply relied on her own experiences to decide what she was going to forego. She decided to take a prideful stance and found empowerment through self-identification.

Although there were similarities across participant in how they identified what needed to be “cleansed” from their lives, not all were eager to *despojar*. Rafael is on the opposite spectrum of Pao. Much of Rafael's African lineage is attached to his father's side of the family. Unfortunately, his father has not been present in his life, which contributed to Rafael's inability to connect with his "Afro" side. He has also found it very difficult to connect with his Puerto Rican side because his mother – his only connection to that culture – juggles three jobs in order to make ends meet. Consequently, Rafael never learned to speak Spanish. He considers his inability to speak Spanish the biggest barrier in his acceptance into the Latina/o group. He has encountered numerous barriers in his attempt to reclaim what his father took with him – the key to his Afro lineage. Rafael had a complicated childhood, his parents got divorced when he was just a baby. Initially, his father was somewhat involved in their lives but after some time, he stopped coming around. Rafael “knew” that speaking about his father in his home was painful for his mother, thus, he silenced his desire to learn about his paternal side.

When Rafael was in high school he could not contain his curiosity and he finally began to ask questions. He found out his paternal side were sugarcane cutters in St.

Croix. His face lit up when he talked about it,

St. Croix, there is a lot of history with that name alone, from the Dutch and the French and a lot of things that you don't realize [as a child], but you are from that place, you are from that thing, your great, great grandmother I've come to figure out was a Black sugar cane cutter who worked the sugarcane on the Island. That's my history.

Nonetheless, that was the extent to his discovery. He still has many questions but has an internal dilemma because he knows that with those questions, his mother has to “relive a painful history.” At the same time, Rafael mentioned when he gets older and is a workingman, he will go to St. Croix in order to learn about his paternal side. In Rafael's case, even though he wants to *despojar, desgranar, y quitar paja* he cannot do it without hurting his mother. Nevertheless, he has promised himself that when he is on his own, he will use his own means to discover and explore that missing history of his lineage.

Although Rafael has grown up in the Bronx, one of the most diverse boroughs in New York, he feels unable to connect to the Latina/o community given his inability to speak Spanish. Yet, he feels in some ways that void has been filled at home since his mom brings that culture alive through her cooking, music, and customs. Despite Rafael's difficulty in learning about his family history, he has filled that void by creating his own identity, an identity that is informed, created, and molded by the borough of the Bronx.

Bronx culture is pretty much brown from the ground up. If you studied the Bronx it has a history of you know rebuilding and people going through this whole process of figuring out who they are, with the music, the art, the people who came up you know ....making a statement finding their own place. They kinda made a place for people like myself, I believe. There are graffiti writers from the Bronx



making a name for themselves, there are artists, not just JLo but you know other people who have come up and come from this area, and have been from this borough, and they have really you know [made an impact].

Rafael sees his life story narrated by the history of struggle, beauty, and resilience of the Bronx. He strongly identifies with the story of the Bronx and in many ways he sees himself "rebuilding" his identity despite the chaos. While he lacked the understanding and knowledge of his paternal side, he is still very proud of his identities and has moved beyond pain to create something new, his identity as a Bronx Native.

I was able to identify how participants felt empowered through the process of questioning and self-search. They began to ask critical questions, looked for answers, and eventually create and forged their own realities. Damian talked about the difficulties he has encountered in attempting to understand the synthesis of Afro and Latina/o. He identifies the lack of information as being the impetus for identity confusion within the AfroLatina/o community.

it's like unless more information is pushed out, I think that is what is always going to happen [feeling lost]. I am not saying that it will always be that way, but at least for as long as I live, you know. It's going to have to be you know that sense of searching and that sense of being lost. It's going to stay that way because you are constantly dealing with these identities that are separate from each other but united together. So I think that not enough information is put out about how they are united and how they like, well historically or racially not enough information exists on how they are united... it is really like a split because of the fact of being lost is having to choose between A or B, and not knowing or recognizing that A and B could be AB or BA. I think that's what makes it so difficult you are like no I am Latino in these aspects and I am of African descent in these other aspects. It's that information, it's not fair, put it together.

He opted to forge his own identity by conducting research on what it means to be an AfroLatino in the United States. The messages he had received through formal education

and in society was that either one was Latina/o or Black, one needed to choose because identifying as an AfroLatina/o was neither acceptable nor permitted. Damian *despojo*, rid himself, of devisive mentality and decided to embrace the synergy of both. He relinquished the long held assumption that Afro and Latino could not be one. Through his use of logic he deduced that in fact “A and B” could be a combination of either “AB or BA.” In this case, Damian formulated a framework from which to operate and assess his new identity as a “Black-ethnic.”

The ability to critically assess how their social experiences were informed through unfortunate and long held stereotypes somehow empowered participants to seek a new reality. Many participants have overcome rejection from the Latina/o community because of their dark skin and prominent African features. Yet, it was apparent that participants dealt with rejection in different ways. For example, Pao decided to cope with the blatant prejudice she experienced by simply forgoing any connection to her Latina/o identity. Pao and Lili are sisters and while they both experienced the same prejudice, Lili confronted that prejudice in a different manner.

Most people will be surprised because they will say, they will always say 'oh, I thought you were from Ghana. I thought you were from Nigeria.' So the reason why I identify myself with Black first its because I've learned to take some pride of my, you know heritage *porque muchas veces uno se siente oh de lado. Por los mismas personas estando alrededor siento hispanas. Entonces uno escucha muchas veces como se refieren acerca de los negros, pero yo soy negra también, y soy hispana, y yo digo yo soy de las dos cosas pero (pauses)... pero como quien dice para defender mi orgullo yo me identifico primero como negra y después como Hispanic yes...*

In Lili's case she decided to *despojar, desgranar, y quitar paja* by acknowledging her Black heritage before her Latina identity. She defends her honor and her identity by

doing the non-traditional, by claiming her Blackness as a source of pride. In Pao's case, she felt compelled to forgo her Latina/o identity as a coping mechanism in order to overcome the rejection she encountered. In turn, Lili decided to claim both her Black and Latina identity but always upholds *negra* as the prominent identity. She mentions "*para defender mi orgullo*" to defend or protect her honor she opted to celebrate her Blackness over Latinidad. In this case, the *choque* occurs when Lili is treated differently because of her physical appearance. Yet, her rebirth is the ability to self-identify as an AfroLatina – noting that Afro will always precede Latina. Her way of cleaning house was simple, acknowledging that she is a combination of both but embracing her prominent physical identity – and the source of her difficult childhood.

### **Chapter Summary**

This chapter assesses how AfroLatina/o college students mold their racial, ethnic, and/or cultural identities. I utilized borderlands theory (Anzaldúa, 2007) as a theoretical framework in order to understand how they navigate and transverse different environments, identities, and realities. Anzaldúa (2007) wrote of the constant identity negotiation process she underwent in finding herself. Eventually she arrived to the *new mestiza* – her rebirth as an informed and liberated individual. Similarly, findings illustrate that participants received constant messages that Blackness was undesirable, to be escaped, and ultimately bad. They underwent their own rebirth, which eventually led them to not only overcome prejudice but also helped construct their new identities.

Two major themes emerged throughout the data. The first, AfroLatina/os: The *Malinali Tenepat*, which was used by Anzaldúa (2007) to depict the rejection of an

identity (Indigenous) and the embrace of another (European). Despite the acceptance of *mestizaje* throughout Latin America, there has always been a deliberate attempt to rid oneself of anything non-European. In many aspects the *mestiza* was rejected and unable to claim her Latinidad. The *malinali tenepat* has a dark shadow casted upon her because it is written in history that she is the reason the conquerors defeated the Indigenous nations of the “New World.” Consequently, *mestiza/os* were conditioned to reject their Indigenous lineage while trying to move towards a Whiter, more European identity. Yet, African lineage is even more rejected and not even mentioned within *mestizaje*. Therefore, by extension the *Malinali Tenepat* holds a similar significance to being an AfroLatina/o.

Findings illustrate that AfroLatina/os encounter a complex and difficult journey. They encountered rejection of their Blackness both within the home and in society. Some participants reported being ridiculed, bullied, and even harassed due to their prominent African features and/or dark skin. Yet, lines were more blurred than expected. In some cases AfroLatina/os would gain acceptance if they were not considered too dark, whatever that meant, and if they spoke Spanish. Nonetheless, message was the same in Latin American and the United States – Black is bad and should be escaped. Anyone who was considered too dark or had “kinky” hair somehow was not cast as a true Latina/o. However, loopholes do exist but it depends on the context, location, language spoken, and individuals’ personality. AfroLatina/os in fact reported feeling a sense of colonization of their identities. They felt compelled to identify within the pre-ascribed

categories of the United States in order to find acceptance. Yet, most participants reported a sense of liberation when they adopted a self-identification.

The second theme, *Nueva Raza Aun Más Cósmica* denotes the rebirth and righteous claim to an authentic and empowering identity – self-identification. Participants acknowledged historical occurrences led to the “creation of something new,” a new type of person, a genetic mixture that was unpredictable and could manifest itself in whatever way at birth. Latina/os are a biological cline, a mixture of Colonial history, Indigenous, and African blood. The marriage of all those cultures created something new that had never existed before – the modern-day Latina/o – which unfortunately identified Whiteness as the goal. Their childhood directly informed how they coped with rejection as adults. For many of the participants they gained empowerment through knowledge searching and understanding history. They all agree educational institutions have done an abysmal job at developing a curriculum that adequately teaches human diversity and world history.

Nonetheless, despite being silences, faceless, and voiceless in the Latina/o community, participants found the courage to craft a new identity born out of the pain, injustice, and discrimination they had encountered. They molded their own identities based on how they coped and overcame the hurt and discrimination endured. The process was very personal and unique. All participants admit that racial and ethnic categories are a vortex, fueled by extremes – oppression and resistance, love and hate, lots of questions and no answers, acceptance and rejection – all of which add to the complexity of being an

AfroLatina/o in the United States. Not only does history play a role in how they identify, is also the impetus for the rejection of AfroLatina/os within the Latina/o community.

All participants found empowerment through self-identification (see Table 5.1 Participant Self-Identifications). What is particularly remarkable is their ability to be ethnic and racial nonconforming – meaning they refuse to be engulfed by the U. S. racial and ethnic categories. Their identities range from nation of origin, to place of birth, and even adjectives describing their gifts and abilities. Ultimately, they all found empowerment through self-designation well beyond AfroLatinidad.

Table 5.1 Participant Self-Identifications

<i>Pseudonym</i>	<i>Ethnic Self-Identification</i>	<i>Racial Self-Identification</i>	<i>Cultural Self-Identification</i>
A	Ecuadorian* Puerto Rican*	AfroEcuadorian Black-European-Indian White White Latino	Latino
Angelo	Hispanic	Black Dominican Hispanic Indigenous-Spanish-Black	Hip Hop New Yorker Dominican Dominican American Hispanic*
Cristhian	AfroLatino*	Dominican of African Descent Black Dominican <i>Negro</i> Mulatto Black AfroLatino	Dominican Latino
Damian	Black ethnic*	AfroLatino Black-Latino	
David	Afro AfroSpic AfroHispanic AfroLatino Dominican NiggerSpic	Dominican*	Bronxite New Yorker American
Destiny	Afro-Dominican* Afro-Latina Dominican	Biracial	Black-Dominican-American Dominican American American

Table 5.1 (continued)

Lily	Garifuna	Black* AfroLatina Honduran Hispanic	<i>Hondureña-Garifuna</i> Hispanic*
Natalia	Work Ethic Intellect Raizal Black	Work Ethic Intellect Black	Work Ethic Intellect Black <i>Providencia de Santa Catalina</i> American
Pao	Garifuna	Garifuna* Black	Garifuna Honduran-Garifuna
Rafael	Bronx Native Latino	Caribbean* Caribbean-Hispanic	Bronx Native New Yorker Puerto Rico St. Croix Hispanic*
Rigo	AfroDominican* African-Latin American* AfroLatino	AfroDominican Blatino African-Latin- American	Dominican Black AfroLatino
Sally	AfroLatina Mixed Puerto Rican African American	Mixed*	Mixed Watered-down- American

All identities are listed alphabetically unless the participant indicated a rank

\*Indicates identity they provided on demographic questionnaire.



## **Chapter 6: Analysis and Findings for Research Questions Two and Three**

This chapter builds upon the previous in order to answer the remaining two research questions: How do AfroLatina/o undergraduate students at a small, urban public college, negotiate in-group acceptance? And, what social and cultural factors do AfroLatina/o college students share that impact their persistence? In this chapter, two theoretical frameworks are utilized: borderlands theory (Anzaldúa, 2007) and colorism (Walker, 1983). The combined frameworks provide the ability to assess how skin tone gradient plays a role in how AfroLatina/o students negotiate within-group acceptance. In addition, because of the strong correlation between sense of belonging and persistence (Strayhorn, 2012), the use of both frameworks yield primary variables that inhibit and/or contribute to within-group membership.

Three key themes surfaced through the findings in this chapter that help answer the two research questions: how do AfroLatina/o undergraduate students at a small, urban, public college negotiate within-group acceptance? And, What social and cultural factors do AfroLatina/o college students share that impact their persistence. The first theme, conceptualizing AfroConsciousness, outlines AfroLatina/o student's resilience and tenacity to persist despite enduring discrimination and rejection from their *mestiza/o* peers. The second theme, perpetual transition, highlights the constant identity negotiation process AfroLatina/os endure both on and off campus, and finally the third theme, "we exist" presents their unique experiences as worthy of being studied beyond their forced assimilation into the U. S. public education system and clumping within the Latina/o

ethnic group. Participants highlight their discontent with their invisibility in courses offered and the campus community as a whole.

### **Conceptualizing Afro-Consciousness**

The majority of participants talk of the challenge of constantly having to traverse physical and cultural spaces. They are forced to make choices and assume an affinity towards a specific group, often needing to make difficult choices about whom to fellowship with on campus and how to negotiate their membership. They metaphorically exist in a borderland where their membership within any group is consistently on trial and challenged. In her poem, “Towards a New Consciousness,” Anzaldúa (2007) writes of the struggles she encountered in walking between the borders.

Because I, a *mestiza*, continually walk out of one culture and into another,  
because I am in all cultures at the same time, *alma entre dos mundos, tres, cuatro*,  
*me zumba la cabeza con lo contradictorio. Estoy norteada por todas las voces*  
*que me hablan simultáneamente.* (p. 99)

Her head buzzes with confusion, the contradictions are too much, and she is forced to simultaneously uphold and celebrate contradictory cultures, which thrusts her into a perpetual nomadic state. While Anzaldúa adequately captures the constant cultural border crossings AfroLatina/os endure, she does not address the importance of race – specifically Blackness – in securing group membership. Thus, I utilized colorism as a theoretical framework in order to understand what role skin tone gradient plays in their group membership.

Walker (1983) calls for a critical assessment of how skin tone gradient is used within the Black community to create a sort of phenotypic hierarchy. The darkest skinned

Blacks are condemned to invisibility and permanent rejection. Similarly, AfroLatina/o students identified how their skin tone was held against them when attempting to gain within-group membership. Nonetheless, through self-reflections, self-affirmation, and self-search, they were able to conceptualize their AfroConsciousness. I devised the term conceptualizing AfroConsciousness in order to capture how they are able to form a concept or idea of their AfroLatinidad through an awareness of their lived realities and experiences. They were able to make sense of their existence by becoming aware of how their Afro identity was perceived by others in society. This section explores how they arrived at conceptualizing their AfroConsciousness and how it helped them belong on campus.

**Identity rebellion.** Participants found liberation and validation when they broke away from negativity. During the focus group, Angelo talked about the ridicule he tolerated as a child due to his physical appearance. It was more than just his dark skin color, it was also his hair texture, his facial features, and mannerisms. He reflected on his discovery that such attitudes were a global phenomenon.

I mean it kinda, it's against you [African ancestry] and you are the odd one out so you, you always feel that, it's just that you don't have the capacity, the mental capacity to take it in to understand and analyze and make sense of it until you get older and you start reading more. You understand other people's colorism issues. You know that it is not just your family, it's a community thing, and it's not just a community thing, it's a global thing, and when you put it in a global context you start to understand that it changes, you understand that it is intentional.

Forging a new identity for him was born out of the necessity to feel validated and human. He grew up in a Dominican household but was born in the United States. He identified as a Dominican but was consistently told that he was *Americano*. Not only did he have to

defend his rightful claim of being Dominican, he also had to construe how the Dominican and *Americano* identities converged.

On campus, not only did he feel invalidated but he also felt rejected. There is one instance that stood out in his mind,

I was in class and the professor was talking about Hispanics in the U. S. and I asked him to tell us what a Hispanic looked like, where they came from and he said well they speak Spanish and come from Latin American countries. So I, told him, I said so I'm not Hispanic then cuz I was born here and my Spanish is bad... you see they don't get it, they just don't...

Angelo felt the need to challenge the professor's stereotypes about who was categorized as a Latina/o. What was more perplexing for Angelo was the professor's response, "he had the audacity to say that he though I was Black, that he had no idea I was Hispanic." Angelo was confronted with the same problem he has encountered his entire life – others assumed he was not Latino due to his phenotype. Nonetheless, Angelo did not let it get to him and he shrugged it off as just one more of many to come. Like most other participants, Angelo found a sort of liberation and prideful claim to a new identity after an extensive scholarly inquiry. He realized what he endured as a child, in his home, and in the classroom was not an anomaly but rather an international phenomenon.

Liberation through scholarship facilitated an identity rebellion for participants. They were not longer held to expectations and stereotypes. They all mentioned having an affinity to their parent's nation of origin but realized they were most definitely influenced by U. S. culture. Angelo decided he could finally claim an identity that adequately represented his existence.

[I identify as a] Dominican American. Now I do have to acknowledge that I am American, I grew up after a certain age, after let's say 10 and 11, I listened to hip-hop, I am from New York, I am a heavy New York person, I grew up in the streets like they say... so that is what separates me from more recent immigrants or even people who are like heavily attached to, solely to Dominican culture. So I am a blend of American and some Dominicaness and hip-hop.

After being told he was not Dominican enough, Angelo decided his identity was a poignant composite of all the cultures that influenced his life. Yet, not all participants found it easy to forge a new identity that was representative of their unique experiences.

Sally, for example, decided she was too much of a cultural mixture and the amount of energy needed to cultivate a new identity was not worth the energy for her. She says, "I have no culture to be honest with you because I am very mixed I don't participate in any particular racial group thing [on campus]... I don't practice any particular cultural aspect. I am just surviving (laughs)." As a child, Sally endured pervasive rejection from other Latina/os children, which left her feeling indifferent about claiming any connection to that cultural group. As a child she was very hurt by it since she could not understand why they did not want to be friends with her. She would go home crying to her parents. Now, as a young adult, she does not engage in conversations with others on campus about race. In her mind, it is too complex to even begin a conversation that would open up old wounds. Thus, she decided that it was best, and easier, to identify as mixed in order to not answer any questions about who she was and why she looked as she did. Although the rejection she endured as a child did not impact her persistence, it does influence with whom she associates herself with on campus.

It was somehow easier for participants to talk about their cultural identity over their racial or ethnic identities. It seemed like they were less constrained to select one over the other. Cultural affinity was aligned with their forms of self-expression. They did not feel the need to justify why they considered themselves as they did. Most selected culture as a way to relate to others on campus rather than race or ethnicity. Destiny grew up in a Dominican household with a single mother, despite never having been to the Dominican Republic, she considered herself Dominican first and then American. Destiny self-identifies as,

Dominican American but with I guess, American culture of course, I was born here. I was raised here. Let me think, but I guess Black culture too so it's, it's more than one it's more than two for me it's three, it's Black culture, Dominican culture, and American culture. I feel like it's awesome it's just the influence. Being influenced by so many different cultures and you meet other people who kinda open your eyes to other cultures as well. So I feel like I'm privileged to be so open to different cultures and to be at this place [Schomburg College] and at this time, you just get so many different interpretations. So much knowledge from so many different people in the world that come into one city and just inspire you. I am open minded to see those things and I think part of the reason is because I had to grow up kind of assimilating to Black culture with my friends and Dominican culture from my mom and American culture because I grew up here so it's it's it's complicated but it's interesting and it's fun.

Destiny feels her open mindedness has helped her define who she is as an individual.

Given that she heavily identifies with Black and American culture, her friends on campus are African Americans and she never encountered any difficulty in gaining acceptance.

Paradoxically, although campus being located in the Bronx, which has a large AfroLatina/o population, Destiny had not encountered other AfroLatina/o students on campus prior to this study. Natalia and Destiny met after their interviews and they became instantaneous friends. In their case, the only two factors contributing to their

friendship were their AfroLatinidad and this study. Their situation was not unique. In fact, all but two participants expressed not meeting another AfroLatina/o on campus until this study. Most participants rely on cultural similarities to find community on campus since they have found it very difficult to meet other self-identified AfroLatina/os. During group Pao said, “well, I don’t see other [AfroLatina/os] here because if they do come they don’t say they are AfroLatinos, they just don’t say it. I don’t know why.” The room lit up with laughter and assertions of agreement from the others. Hence, they rely on cultural similarities in order to both gain membership into cultural groups and to develop community on campus.

Destiny and Natalia have a different perspective on what exactly constitutes culture. For Destiny, she has taken the amalgamation approach. She has identified what cultural, racial, and ethnic aspects influence her life and celebrates all three. In Natalia’s case, her understanding of culture is more complex. She established a more critical approach, which breaks away from traditional modes of understanding cultural affinity.

I guess culturally, well I generally don’t think in those terms but ethnically and racially I identify as Black just because it is very simple. It’s usually what is on every survey and Census. So even if I did have a particular [cultural] label for myself, it wouldn’t provide enough insight and explanation into who I am so Black is simple and it is easy... I really cling more towards my intellect and also to my work ethic. I mean increasingly as I’m part of the workforce and that takes up most of my time. I identify very strongly with my work ethic and my intellect.

Natalia was raised by her mother and grandmother who heavily influenced how she views herself and her identities. In many aspects she has found liberation by “clinging” to intellect and work ethic as identities. She refuses to be categorized into boxes that carry with them long held assumptions and negative beliefs about people of color. Natalia led

her own identity rebellion by going well beyond socially accepted cultural designations, she refuses to be held captive to others' expectations. She wants to be judged by her strengths and assets rather than her phenotype and genetic lineage. Nonetheless, Destiny and Natalia found companionship through their unspoken experiences of being AfroLatinas on a college campus.

The majority of participants were born and raised in the Bronx. Their understanding of who they are is heavily influenced by the geographic location. In many aspects, the borough contributed to the formation of their identity but it has also limited their educational pathways. Rafael has found it difficult to rightfully claim his Latinidad, and even his AfroLatinidad because of his complicated family structure. He was never fully exposed to either culture. Thus, he relied on what he knew: the Bronx.

What is my identity? (pauses) I mostly align myself with a Bronx native. I have come to the facts you know..... (pauses) I don't... yes, I am Latino, yes all those things comprise who I am but I make my claim as a Bronx native living in America.

For Rafael, the Bronx serves as a source of pride. That is what he knows, he heavily identifies with the culture and in many aspects he sees his own life story reflected in the story of the Bronx. Unlike other participants, Rafael does not have strong family ties to St. Croix or Puerto Rico. He does not feel a connection to a land that has given him nothing. His mother is his only connection to Puerto Rico but she speaks very little of its influence in her life. Consequently, Rafael has found empowerment and friendship with other Bronxites on campus who also make their claim as Bronx natives.



The unfortunate aspect of living in the Bronx was the poor educational system, which Rafael feels failed him. Throughout his K-12 education he consistently heard teachers tell him, or his friends that “they would never amount to anything.” Most of his high school friends did not graduate, a few are dead, and he is the only one who is in college. His education pathway has been filled with obscurity so for him being on campus is not only to secure a good job, “the way I see it, I am here to have a better future.. you know, like, its about life and death you know, I don’t have much out there.” When Rafael is on campus he is hyper focused on graduating. His groups of friends are those who he has classes with and are in the nursing program.

**Power of the tongue.** Findings illustrate language plays a critical role in gaining group acceptance. The majority of participants had traveled to Latin America where their sense of belonging was put to the test through their mastery of the native language. In the United States, language was equally important but in a different manner. AfroLatina/o in the U. S. find themselves in perpetual transition due to the assumed misalignment of their physical characteristics and languages spoken. What is constant across nations is the rejection of Blackness. For example, a Black person in Latin America will be rejected and mistreated due to their dark skin. In the U. S. it is more complex than an outright rejection. Participants agreed that in the U. S. the lines are much more blurred. If an AfroLatina/o speaks Spanish then they will be accepted into the Latina/o group as long as they are not “too dark.” Once the individual crosses the acceptable skin tone barrier, their acceptance is complicated. This notion is complicated further on campus.

Rigo speaks about his experiences growing up in the Midwest, in a predominantly African American neighborhood and consistently needing to justify why he spoke Spanish.

Going from a point where you listen so much to other people telling you what you have to define yourself as if you speak some Spanish, like that you were trying to be more than what you really are or that you think you are better than them. Those were my struggles. Well some of the struggles my sisters and I had to go through growing up. Because everything was fine and dandy growing up until people started to meet my mother and then they were like 'wait a minute she is not .....Black. Ok, wait a minute. What's going on?' Then they would hear us speaking [in Spanish] to one another and you know it just turned into issues. So over time [my identity] has evolved, and me being more comfortable with saying this is what I identify myself as and being proud of that yes. Aha!

Rigo is the only one of his siblings that moved out of the Midwest and his identity has certainly evolved with his move. He speaks about the difficulties his siblings still endure and their lack of affinity towards their Dominican culture. On campus Rigo has developed a core group of friends who are Dominican. He takes great pride in being able to speak Spanglish with them and to reminisce about the motherland. Rigo travels to the Dominican Republic once a year but his siblings have never visited. He attributes his self-discovery to his exposure to other Dominicans in New York. Without the move to New York, he feels he would have eventually assimilated to the dominant African American culture in his community in order to avoid being "othered." Language has a paradoxical existence in AfroLatina/os lives. For example, Rigo was even "beat up" in the Midwest because he spoke Spanish but in New York it is the insignia to gain acceptance into the Latina/o community. Rigo asserts that on campus skin color is not as important as language and self-identification.

Cristhian recently immigrated to the United States and has been attempting to understand the relationship between language and sense of belonging on campus. The majority of his friends are international students or other immigrants. Yet, he is often categorized as African American even though he does not identify as such. In the Dominican Republic although AfroDominicans are denied full acceptance due to their dark skin they are not forced to define who they are on a daily basis. In New York, where racial and ethnic diversity is vast, the lines are blurred and immigrants find themselves thrust into an identity vortex.

There is like two sides to it [being Black in the U. S.] There is the you can't be Black because you speak Spanish and then even though you speak Spanish that doesn't mean you aren't Black. I mean there are Brazilians that speak Portuguese and Haitians who speak French or Creole. So you could be both Black and speak any language. It doesn't matter but I guess keeping the fact that Spanish is like a marker, like an insignia, the marker for Latinos in the U. S ... you know. If you are a native speaker and fluent, people see you as like you are Black you are different you are not like us... even with English. You can tell I have an accent but you can't tell where I am from and some people ask 'are you like half French or are you half something' just because of the way you speak. I am like 'no. I am Dominican born and reared over there.' I got here two years ago and... I don't know.

When Cristhian was in the Dominican Republic he underwent rejection and prejudice by his classmates due to his prominent African lineage but he had learned to navigate those difficult spaces. When he arrived to the U. S. he was suddenly living in a country that has a different history with Blacks – a history he knew about but did not understand – although both nations have an equally negative history of how they treated Blacks. Not only did language impact how his Blackness was perceived in the U. S. but his accent also rendered him as a Black immigrant on campus. Thus, Cristhian surrounds himself

with non-U. S. born peers since he is not constantly questioned about his accent, his Blackness, nor his nation of origin.

Paradoxically, Cristhian could not rightfully claim his Black ancestry since he speaks impeccable Spanish but he is also not accepted as a Latino due to his Black traits. He delineates how other nationals are able to speak another language and be Black but for Latina/os, language is more important. There are many contradictions in the messages he has received in the U. S. In many ways he is being casted out from the Latina/o community because his Spanish is too good but he has an accent in English, which limits his experiences on campus – given the prevalent immigrant stigma. The lines are way too blurred and multifaceted. Nonetheless, the only consistency is language impacts AfroLatina/os within-group acceptance or rejection. Like Cristhian, Pao grew up outside the United States and immigrated at an older age. However, Pao has more prominent African features that contributed to a very difficult childhood in Honduras. She does not identify as Latina and rejects any connection to that culture, in fact she identifies as Garifuna or Black only. Language is also important to her but in a very complicated way. Although she identifies as Garifuna she never learned to speak the language because her parents wanted to safeguard the family from any discrimination. Thus, language is not a factor for Pao in gaining group acceptance on campus. She consciously decides to not speak Spanish since she associates it with bullying.

Assimilation seems to be the best answer when attempting to blend in but it could also have unforeseen negative consequence. For Pao, despite an attempt to assimilate, she endured overt and pervasive discrimination by mestizos in Honduras. Consequently, she

was denied membership into both communities. When she immigrated to the U. S. she carried with her painful memories that prevented her from seeking membership with Latina/os on campus. Although she does not identify as Latina and rejects any connection to that identity, she does take advantage of the perk of being bilingual in the United States. “When I am doing my resume I always put that I am Hispanic because I know that if I speak Spanish that will open a lot of doors... I am just taking advantage of the language that is all.” Language has influenced her identity in multiple ways but more so off campus. She is now taking Garifuna language classes offered through Garifuna community leaders in her neighborhood. There is something inherently empowering about “taking advantage” of being able to speak Spanish. In some ways through her use of Spanish she is reclaiming her pride and dignity but when she is on campus with her friends, they only speak English.

Having a transnational identity directly impacts participant’s experiences on campus in a different way than those who were born in the United States. They had to navigate additional realities and expectations that U. S.- born AfroLatina/os did not. For example, even though Natalia was born in the United States she spent a great deal of time in Colombia. Her mother was born in an island where Patois Creole is the primary language spoken. Hence, Natalia learned to speak Patois Creole but no one other than her family speaks it, making her home the only place in the U. S. where she can freely express herself.

Yes, language is important and not just English or Spanish but also the Patois Creole that the people speak on the Island because it was a formally an English colony. So the people there speak Patois it’s Creole. So in the United States we

speaking that in this house you know between me, my mother, my grandmother, my uncle and it's very natural for me. Spanish is sort of like you know after English and after Creole then there is Spanish for me just because you know my greatest exposure to it was through the school system. We had Spanish class twice a week in elementary and middle school and then more recently of course in college but definitely language in terms of Patois which is unique to the island.

Language is not only important in Natalia's life but it also serves a connection between her mothers' nation of origin. In their household it is the preferred language and Spanish has no real place within their home. She learned it at school but Natalia mentioned not having any Latina/o friends because she grew up in a non-Latina/o community. When she went to college she was in the honors program where very few Latina/o enroll. Thus, despite living in such a diverse metropolitan area, she has very little exposure to other Latina/os on campus.

The assumption that all Latina/os speak Spanish has disadvantaged some participants. In Natalia's case, even when she would speak Spanish she often encountered resistance of her being Latina because of her phenotype and "imperfect" Spanish. The myth of Latina/o homogeneity overlooks the vast language diversity that also exists within this ethnic category. AfroLatina/os who do not speak Spanish are more easily cast out of Latinidad. In effect, they have two strikes against them – their inability to master Spanish and their phenotype. Sally is bilingual but does not speak Spanish. Her second language is not valued because in order to fellowship with other Latina/os one must speak Spanish.

The only other language I actually speak is Japanese. I learned that in high school but I have learned to learn Spanish because most of the people I'm around [at work] are Hispanics. They find it weird that I know Japanese but I don't know

Spanish, which in their eyes it's easier to pick up but I have been trying to learn Spanish and Italian just so that I can identify with them more.

The ability to speak Spanish would afford Sally the opportunity to identify with other Latina/os. She is pre-health major and speaking Spanish in the medical field is particularly important in New York. She admits trying to learn but learning has not come easy to her. Although, she does admit her desire to learn is necessity based rather than a desire to claim it as her ethnic heritage. Sally was rejected by other Latina/o children growing up because she was Black, in effect that contributes to her divestment of learning Spanish. Hence, she decided to learn Japanese rather than Spanish in high school. On campus she surrounds with herself with peers who identify as mixed race and their common language is English. Thus, language has not been a limiting factor for her in gaining in-group acceptance on campus.

Rafael often talked about “the power of the tongue” because despite his genuine desire to befriend other Latina/o kids, he encountered consistent rejection due to his inability to speak Spanish. Yet, as he grew older he realized that while the tongue is important what was more important was finding his own identity.

I know I can understand some of the words they are saying but the tongue isn't there and it was you know hard... I was trying to understand the three words that they were saying to try to piece it together... but it was hard you know. So it was questionable growing up but now I know. I do claim my heritage. I do claim where my parents are from and where I am from because I have my specific identity. I have my own personality.

Once Rafael realized he had his own identity, language moved to be secondary. He is determined to be an excellent nurse and he believes although his Spanish is limited, he will deliver superb service. He refuses to allow language to become a barrier both

professionally and personally. He has a rightful claim to his cultural lineage but has molded his own identity, which allows him to thrive and straddle both realities at the same time. Yet, when he is on campus his desire to become the best nurse possible propels him to build community among the hardest working students in his classes – not necessarily those who he shares cultural, racial, or ethnic identities with him.

**Disaggregating Blackness.** The first step in doing away with colorism is to disaggregate Blackness. Banks (2014) asserts there are certain caveats one must understand about colorism. First, it is relative; skin tone of another member may be judged based on his or her own skin tone. Second, in-group notions about skin color and acceptability may differ from perceptions outside the group. I suggest that historical formation and delineations of group categorization must also be assessed through a transnational perspective. That is, AfroLatina/os have an additional layer of complexity, that of the Latina/o ethnic group and all its stipulations.

Participants suggested that in order to best understand their own racialized experiences in the U. S. they need to be understood as Blacks but separate from African Americans and other Blacks. It is not about delineating a separation in order to establish their superiority but rather a form of respect. Damian was born and raised in the Bronx. He has critically assessed the embodiment of being an AfroLatino in the U. S. on a college campus well beyond the established norms.

Being an [Afro]Latino on campus it's almost like you can't really call yourself Black because African-Americans have their own history that is separate... and you have to understand there is a separation and... you can't claim something that is not necessarily yours. It's like saying we are all Black. Yeah, the Diaspora aspect is there but not the history.



He is wise well beyond his years. He is cautious to not claim a history that is not his. However, if he were to identify solely as Black many would make the assumption that he is African American. Damian acknowledged that understanding the history of African Americans in the U. S. is of the utmost importance. He cannot claim a painful history that is simply not his own. Damian feels there is a different type of person on campus. There he is seen as Black but there is not distinction between AfroLatina/os and African Americans.

Through a critical thought process of self-exploration, Damian is able to disaggregate Blackness and mold his own identity. He self-identifies as a Black-ethnic because he is proud of his Blackness but is cognizant of the Black-White binary, which would render him African American by default. He has often challenged monoracial discourse in his classes and his professors do not know how to reply. “The information isn’t there, they don’t want to get it, its not important to them so they just call me a troublemaker.” He is also surprised by the lack of interest his peers demonstrate. They seem to not care or are complaisant with what is being taught. In understanding his AfroLatinidad, Damian also recognizes the benefits afforded to him by having an additional culture, a transnational identity that African Americans do not have.

I think for Latinos it’s like you know I was born here and I feel like I should have claim to some of that history because I have grown up here, everything that I have is here and the reality is that it’s not... a lot of AfroLatinos grow up with their parent’s culture. You know wherever that came from the Islands, South American, wherever that was. So I think it does give you this sense of re-having to identify. Am I Latino? Am I Black? How does each of those come together? That impacts your [social] circle.

Damian grew up in a Dominican household where his parents consistently remind him of his Latinidad and the responsibility of upholding that identity over the *Americana*; yet, he was born in the U. S. and his social group consists of Jamaicans and Trinidadians. In fact, Damian grew up in a predominantly non-Latina/o community, which fostered the impetus for understanding how his identity, culture, and race interact. On campus he mostly aligns himself with other AfroLatina/os who are on a similar quest to understand their lineage. He has a small circle of friends but all conduct self-searches outside their academic spaces.

Schomburg College is a commuter campus, making it more difficult to establish a set of friends on campus beyond those in the classroom. In addition, Damian does not see campus as a place that fosters or upholds his identity as an AfroLatina/o. Student clubs and course materials operate off of the Black-White binary – overlooking his desire to learn about the synthesis of Black and Latina/o. Angelo shares a similar sentiment to Damian but he decided to get involved in student government by establishing a chess club. Much of his involvement on campus is not concentrated on aligning himself with other AfroLatina/os but rather moving beyond racial categorizations. Angelo endured colorism inside his home, which led him to think more critically about how Blackness is perceived by individuals and the long-term impact it could have on the recipients of prejudice.

Angelo is a non-traditionally aged student and is very intentional about the type of impact he wants to have on campus. He stated not really learning anything new in his classes but acknowledges the biggest benefit college has brought him is the ability to

conduct scholarly research. He spends hours on the computer reading about history and how perceptions of Blackness have remained stagnant over time.

African-Americans is a concept that was made by Europeans to not call them Americans so that they could make slavery a thing. That was stored perpetual so they can make slavery perpetual. They had to make something perpetual by differentiating between this person and this person and this person is lower and lesser. They had to do that to make it perpetual and in order to make someone less, you had to make someone better so I don't think we should continue into 2015 still going on this, on this dichotomy.

College afforded Angelo with the ability to not only pose critical questions but also find answers to questions that stemmed from his childhood experiences. He realized the rejection of Blackness has a deep-rooted history in slavery and although centuries have passed, differentiation of people based on skin color is still pervasive in modern society. Paradoxically, the knowledge search is for himself and not his social circle. It seems he feels the less emphasis he places on race, the less prejudice he will encounter, hence the chess club. In this case, the disaggregation of Blackness has a historical component attached to it, that is, one must comprehend the historical roots of Blackness.

Participants utilize their personal experiences as frameworks from which to assess their AfroLatinidad. Geography, or physical location, directly informs how Black or Latina/o are perceived. For example, Natalia grew up in a New York suburb and the majority of the students in her high school were African American. There were few Latina/os but the majority had light skin and "the good hair." Consequently, she was not "allowed into the circle" because of her dark skin and "nappy hair." When she would tell them that she is AfroLatina, their reaction was always the same.

There is no way, there is no, like you are lying there is no way, you are just making it up so that you sound exotic. There is no way, you just say it to sound more appealing, like no you have nappy hair' and I am like no... I just shrug, I just shrug, its not worth it.

Natalia did not let it bother her and in fact it was beneficial for her because she was able to redirect her attention to her academics in high school and enroll in the Honors Program at Schomburg College. Her freshman year in college she decided to give it another try, particularly because she felt that by being in the Bronx her, "Blackness would be more accepted" but that was not the case. The majority of her classes were in the Honors Program, which enrolled pre-dominantly White students, limiting her exposure to other AfroLatina/os. As aforementioned, Natalia and Destiny met through the study and they were each other's first AfroLatina friends on campus. If Blackness were understood as heterogeneous, Natalia would not have to consistently justify how she could possibly be both Latina and Black.

The homogenous approach to understanding the experiences of Blacks is equally problematic to that of the homogeneous approach to understanding Latina/os.

AfroLatina/os straddle both realities and often have to go out of their way to establish that they are both – Black and Latino. David shared how intentional he needs to be when introducing himself on campus to other Latina/os or professors. There are unspoken rules that one must abide by in order to be seen as a Latina/o.

I have always tried to be more inclusive in my mind set because that is how my parents where. But you don't necessarily get that from the people you interact with, and unless I go out of my way... like for example when you say your name if you don't say your name with a hint of a Spanish accent, it will get swallowed up by English. So I think that goes a long ways in how others identify you as well. If I walk up and say good afternoon my name is David (in English) as opposed to

good afternoon my name is David (in Spanish), ‘*oh, so tu ere hispano ok*’... but if I just walk up to a [Latina/o] person and say hello my name is David (in English) they will be like ‘what is this *Moreno* doing walking up on us?’ You know what I mean? So you get some of that if you don’t outwardly express yourself or outwardly identify yourself to other people because they look at me and think I am African-American or that I’m Black.

David is able to disaggregate Blackness through a meticulous and systematic way of introducing himself to others. In his case, he is able to utilize language to negotiate in-group acceptance or to establish himself as a Latino. The well established, but unspoken, gateway into Latinidad for AfroLatina/os is the Spanish language. Nonetheless, David is within the “acceptable” standards of Blackness. If he were darker skinned, his access to the Latina/o group would have been more complex than simply speaking Spanish. In addition, David is a non-traditionally aged student and students gravitate towards him rather than he needing to negotiate acceptance. He is also more confident and solid on his identity making it easier for him to correct people when they incorrectly categorize him as African American.

### **Perpetual Transition**

Findings clearly illustrate how participants find themselves in a perpetual transition, between and among cultures, races, and ethnicities. The AfroLatina/o experience is different than other Blacks in the United States because many of them hold a panethnic identity that provides an additional layer of richness, but also complexity. Participants expressed feeling compelled to change their identities according to their surroundings. Their homes uphold cultural traditions and customs native to their parent’s nation of origin. It provided them clear expectations and norms to follow. At school

and with friends, it was a bit more complicated. Cultural norms and standards were influenced by neighborhood, diversity of friends, language, and nation of origin. Participants were caught in a never-ending border crossing thrusting them into a perpetual nomadic state.

They learned how to negotiate their sense of belonging within each group and to comply with the established standards. However, it is extremely difficult to transition back and forth without losing oneself in a whirlwind of expectations. Thus, this theme presents the difficulties that AfroLatina/os encounter when attempting to negotiate acceptance and belonging to social groups.

**Mental *nepantilism*:** Participants reported feeling torn between one way of being and another. They had an understanding of the expectations established for membership within each cultural setting but it was more complex than simply abiding by them. The fact that they are AfroLatina/os complicated their sense of belonging within any particular group. Anzaldúa (2007) writes about a similar experience. Mental *Nepantilism* is “an Aztec word meaning torn between ways” and the way to survive is by adopting a counterstance but “its not a way of life” (p. 100). Participants acknowledged the constant requirement of justifying how they could possibly be both Latina/o and Black at the same time was fatiguing.

Pao talks about despite negative experiences in Honduras, she did not have to justify whom she was in order to gain Latina/o in-group membership. In the U. S. and particularly in a large urban setting and on campus, she is frequently asked why she speaks such great Spanish.

I... am.... (long pause) well it's complicated. If I want to explain myself then I say I am a Garifuna but if I don't want to I just say that I am Black. If they want a specific answer they will be like, 'where is that accent coming from?' Then I will be like 'oh, I am Honduran. Some people will say 'oh, so you are Garifuna you know the language and all that?' I tell them, 'Yes I am Garifuna, no I don't know the language but yes I'm Honduran Garifuna.'

Pao identifies as a Garifuna yet she does not speak the language. Her first language is Spanish but it carries with it painful reminders of blatant prejudice she and her family endured in Honduras. Pao finds herself needing to justify why she does not speak Garifuna, why she speaks Spanish, and why her English is spoken with a strong accent. Yet, *mestiza/os* would not need to justify themselves that extensively. She often condenses her identity to Black in order to avoid lengthy explanations. On campus she surrounds herself with friends who are students of color but who do not place as much emphasis on race.

Participants did not differentiate much between their experiences on campus and in society. In fact, when they were speaking about their experiences on campus they would quickly turn to examples at work or in the city. The perpetual transition in social environments was very similar to those on campus. Lili, who emigrated to the U. S. from Honduras, reflects on her own experiences on campus.

You feel a little weird because you... feel... you feel people, how people look at you *entonces es como* you speak English and everything is ok, good. Like you will feel kinda welcome to the group but once you start speaking Spanish it's weird because it's like they say 'oh I thought you were more from us...' y *así como quien dice oh no tu tienes tu grupito* you know I feel like a little bit outside when they realize I speak Spanish. That is why sometimes and it is weird because sometimes I want to speak Spanish in front of people but sometimes I decide no I am not going to speak Spanish so I don't feel excluded... *entonces no tenía muchos amigos no se, será no se porque me escuchaban hablar español no se pero... no casi siempre* Africans from Africa o *Latinos curiosamente*, yeah

Lili is very intuitive and is always looking for nonverbal cues in order to discern how she will be treated by others. When she initially enrolled at Schomburg College, the majority of her friends were African immigrants. They never asked where she was from because they assumed she was from Ghana or Nigeria. Once they heard her speaking Spanish it automatically casted her out of their inner circle. She felt perplexed. The Latina/o students automatically casted her out because she was considered “too dark” and the African immigrant group disapproved of her speaking Spanish. She did not have many friends on campus but she coped by simply blending into the background and speaking very little.

Lili registered her experiences on campus as official ways to navigate U. S. society. At work she seldom speaks Spanish but is always cautious of how others will react. She is caught between celebrating her Latina/o heritage and finding social acceptance. Like Lili, Christian also has a panethnic identity. He emigrated to the U. S. right after high school and enrolled at Schomburg College. He is more outspoken and assertive about his Latino identity. Yet, in the United States he is not seen as a Latino but rather something else.

When you come to a person like me, where my mom and dad are really dark skinned Dominicans, and then you have me and you have my brother. We are called just Dominicans in DR. And then here you have a person who will see me as a Black person, a Black man, and not see me as a full Latino who even speaks better Spanish than other Latinos who are here. You know what I mean? A lot of people call themselves Latinos and they don’t even know the language. They don’t even know the history, nothing. They are just Americans but they call themselves that way.



In the Dominican Republic he did not find it difficult to fit in, everyone knows that Dominicans are mixed, some darker than others. Christhian did not realize just how important skin color was in the United States until he experienced it first hand. He has found it very difficult to attend class because the professors perpetrate a fictitious U. S. centric curriculum, which he feels disadvantages everyone. Although he lives in the U. S., he still holds on fondly to his identity as a Dominican and consistently reminds everyone he encounters on campus he is not Dominican-American. Christhian is torn in more than two ways; first, he lives in the U. S. but does not identify with the culture, customs, or traditions. Second, he wants others to acknowledge his AfroLatino identity but not at the cost of overlooking his nationality. Third, he feels his ability to speak proficient Spanish establishes him as an authentic Latino. Fourth, being a Latino requires a thorough understanding of history.

Christhian identified multiple challenges AfroLatina/os encounter. He is confronted with having to make choices based on his worldview, which is mostly informed by his upbringing in the Dominican Republic. Participants identified how Latin American countries and the U. S. diverge in their treatment of AfroLatina/os. For example, Christhian outlined how foreign-born Latina/os consider themselves to be more authentic than their U. S. born counterparts. This sentiment is also reinforced in Latin American countries. A explains how his self-identification has been impacted by the perception that U. S. born Latina/os are only quasi-Latina/os.

Diego Calderon is a *reggaeton* artist and he identifies himself as a Black Latino and I think that that is very admirable and I actually admire him for doing that because I know what he is doing, I get the point and in Puerto Rico it catches on

but out here it's like, it doesn't really catch on because even if we are dark skinned and then we go to Puerto Rico they still call us gringos... because we don't speak the same type of Spanish like Puerto Ricans do from Puerto Rico.

A is a light skinned Latino and has found racial classification in the U. S. to be extremely limiting. He was using Diego Calderon as an example of someone who looks like him but is able to identify as a "Black Latino" even though he may not present as such. Like most Latina/os, A has African lineage in his family but his phenotype would tell you otherwise. He grew up in Miami and later moved to New York, his Spanish is almost nonexistent and the little Spanish he speaks is closer to Spanglish.

When A visits Puerto Rico he is considered a *gringo* since he does not speak Spanish and comes from the United States. Paradoxically, on campus A does not want to associate himself with Blacks. He feels most Blacks on campus are African Americans and he does not want to align himself with them. He expressed being open to hang out with African immigrants but not African Americans. When pressed to answer why, he simply replied "I just don't align myself with them, you know, the way they dress and act, and talk... I don't like it and I don't want to be around it." Yet, A has sought membership into the AfroLatina/o community but was rejected due to his light skin. He finds himself torn between trying to gain membership within the AfroLatina/o community but making assumptions that most Blacks on campus are African American – and by extension people he does not want to associate with due to negative stereotypes associated with African Americans.

Perpetual transition between three cultures is difficult to navigate. There seems to be a resurgence of pride and dignity within the AfroLatina/o community. In many ways

they have grown tired of living in the shadows and having to justify themselves – or consistently prove their worth. They have begun to create spaces where they are no longer confined by Black or Latina/o standards. They are breaking away from living under the shadows of Latinidad and molding a new reality for them and for future generations. David delivered a very powerful closing to the second interview where he manifested the need for AfroLatina/os to overcome the Latina/o sub-group categorization.

I see that other AfroLatinos are finding within themselves power. There is a greater desire to educate, that greater desire for political empowerment, for economic movement you know, upward mobility. Everybody doesn't want to live in an apartment, everybody doesn't want to share small living quarters, everybody doesn't want to drive an old beat up car, everybody doesn't want to be a cab driver, everybody is not happy just being a cook, or you know, owning a little food stand or a truck you know. We really do want to be educated and empowered entrepreneurs. We want to be politically active we want to feel empowered enough to change the world around us and the world at large. I think that there are AfroLatinos and AfroHispanics who see what is happening now with the American society, where Black men are victims of senseless police violence and we don't see ourselves any different you know. We see where they are open discriminations, you know, open discrimination against people due to the color of their skin or whatever. Or due to their cultural practices and we don't want to fall into that as well. As a community we want to be empowered to have greater control over our individual lives and greater control towards the future of our children. We want to be able to stand on a solid foundation and tell our children, 'you know what if this is possible, IT IS possible not because it is a dream.' I think that it makes a big difference in how we translate our culture and our identity to the next generation.

David is the oldest participant in the study and is seen by his peers as a mentor. On campus he does not look for friends since he has an established community off campus. However, young Latina/o students look at him for mentorship and guidance. He draws from his own experiences in order to ignite passion and commitment to a better future for

all AfroLatina/os. David makes sure he communicates a positive outlook for the future. The perpetual transition that AfroLatina/os undergo on a daily basis, many times a day, does not have to be the standard. There is no need to be living in constant transition but that mission needs to be clearly articulated by all AfroLatina/os.

Overall, David is hopeful and feels AfroLatina/os are going through a sort of awakening where they are no longer complacent with sub-category status. Yet, he strongly believes that colleges need to provide educational opportunities that are reflective of the realities students endure. College should provide students with the ability to engage in meaningful dialogue about important issues. David expressed not feeling challenged in his classes but expressed a deep desire colleges would offer more critical courses.

**Negotiating blackness and latinidad.** Being an AfroLatina/o requires one to consistently define how much of each identity they uphold. They belong to two identities that are often counterpoised by a fundamental lack of historical information. Yet, participants have found benefits in negotiating their identities. They developed knowledge seeking as a coping mechanism that in turn supports and validates their presence. In being pressed to define their identities, participants began to ask critical questions of their own. Angelo wanted to understand what exactly constituted being Latina/o. He came across countries that, in his opinion, should be included within the Latina/o ethnic group but since they are located outside of the defined geographic parameters, they are excluded.

There is a country called Equatorial New Guinea, they speak Spanish they were a colony of Spain it is in West Africa. It is purely a West African culture genetically. Culturally they are West African but they speak Spanish now are they Hispanic? Everyone would say no but they speak the same language as everybody else. That is what I'm saying, I think people conflict a little too much. France has numerous former colonies around the world but most of them are in Africa and in the Middle East to Tunisia and Algeria, but they are not French and no Frenchman would ever say that they are French. So the same thing with Spaniards the Spaniard would never say that he has any type of bloodline with a Dominican but that is the racist in him because he does, not all of it of course we are different, we are different people. We have different mixtures but to deny that they were even over here is just a lot.

Angelo reflects on the rigidity of the Latina/o category but its lack of logic and consistency. He utilizes information to help him understand why he felt rejected within the Latina/o community. He quickly realized that he was being held to socially constructed categories, which had no bearing in reality. Angelo is very sensitive to how he interacts with others on campus. He has a clear understanding that categories are boxes designed to keep people out and in turn create division. Thus, when people share their identities with him, he honors them as such and never questions their authenticity.

A resounding theme across interviews was constantly being questioned and/or told that they could not possibly be Latina/os. However, for recent immigrants it did not matter as long as they were accepted into the Latina/o group. Although the sample of recent immigrants was very small in this study (n= 3) it highlights the additional challenges they are forced to overcome on campus. Christian, Pao, and Lili all have very different experiences on campus but all agree there is something inherently important about belonging to a group that understands their unique challenges. For example, Lili felt more comfortable with the Latina/o group despite feeling a little bit like an outsider.

I felt more connection (pauses) more comfortable maybe because of the language but also similarities. I mean we talk about food (pauses) and you know we have a lot of differences but we have a lot of things in common. So yeah so we always identify with something in common.... *La cultura mas que todo... (smiling) my group of friends were always Latino, Latinas, pero AfroLatinos* I think just my sister (laughing) *pero siempre eran latinos mi grupo grande*. I mean I would always speak to all my classmates almost all of my classmates *pero siempre mi grupito eran hispanas Latinas, siempre*

She mentions the importance of culture, food, and language in establishing a connection with others. When she initially enrolled at Schomburg College her first group of friends were African immigrants but after they heard her speaking Spanish, she began to feel excluded. Although she did not feel 100% acceptance in the Latina/o group, she had more in common with them, and that was enough to keep her there. Lili jokes about her only AfroLatina friend on campus being her sister. She discovered U. S. born AfroLatina/os on campus did not necessary identify as Latina/o. They blended into the “*cultura Americana y no decian ser AfroLatinos*.” Since they did not outwardly profess their AfroLatinidad, Lili did not meet other self-identified AfroLatina/os on campus.

The perpetual transition that AfroLatina/os endure is complicated further by having a panethnic identity. Most study participants were born in the United States but have very strong connections to their parent’s nation of origin. Damian shared the intricacies that arise when AfroLatina/os realize they are not Black within U. S. standards but also not Latina/os. He talked about the process of “re-having to identity” as not being linear. He talked about having the same conversation with himself at home, with friends, on campus, and at work – the same conversation but with different details and outcomes. Yet, his group of friends on campus were also other “knowledge seekers.” They often

engaged in critical conversations about book, articles, and stories they had read. Their affinity towards one another was not racial, ethnic, or cultural but rather the pursuit of knowledge. Coincidentally, the majority are students of color but not all are AfroLatina/os.

Damian was able to foster a very unique space for himself on campus. He formed a group of critical scholars on campus. They meet at the library and talk for hours about race, racism, colonialization, Blackness, and other relevant issues. They have found empowerment through self-education. Nonetheless, there is a very clear distinction between the experiences of immigrants and U. S. AfroLatina/os. Chrishtian finds it more difficult to have conversations about race because race and racial categories differ by country. The United States is different in the sense that it houses people from all over the world but it has a very prejudices history filled with maltreatment of people of color. In his conceptualization of what it means to be AfroLatina/o in the United States, he brings in the ugly historical past and the impact it still has on Blacks. Although Chrishtian does have White friends, he tries to not talk about race with them because it annoys him when they get defensive over the topic.

I feel like everyone but it is well when I talk with my White friends either Brazilian or [U.S.] White, there is this White guilt and I am like I don't want to shame you and they are like the White guilt and I hate White guilt. It's like we know what we did but we are sorry and we are going to cry and be like so sensitive... I am like no I don't want that.... then when I talk with my Black friends it's like you know, you feel the pain the agony. [Yet,] a lot of them have an incorrect assumption of who was a slave. Even though I am Black I had none of that but their struggle is as part of mine. I feel that if they were Black in Brazil or here in America it was really hard for you growing up. They even got the right to vote in 1960 something. People in the Dominican Republic have been [able to vote] since ever. So there aren't any like anti-African laws in the DR. You can marry whoever you want to, Black or White. Over here they were different, they had the Jim Crow laws, and the one-drop rule, and people grew up knowing all

this stuff and even if they were like ‘oh, that doesn’t affect me at all’ it definitely does. I have seen that from my friends and I guess it depends on who you talk to, it’s quite different.

Christhian finds himself needing to transition back and forth from his experiences as an AfroLatino in the Dominican Republic and the U. S. He always makes it very clear he is not from the United States and as such he does not have the same history as other Blacks. The slavery component seems to be the biggest point of contention. Even on campus when they get into race conversations with other Blacks, a few participants experienced being told by some African American peers that they were not really Black because they were never slaves. Destiny shared her experience in the focus group,

“its crazy cuz you know I like being friends with everyone but sometimes they like, they say things, like the other day this girl was talking about being Black and I didn’t know what it was like cuz I told her I was Dominican, and she said yeah but you aren’t really Black cuz you were never a slave... to me its like, I get it but I’m still Black.”

Destiny was a bit taken back given the amount of personal turmoil she has experienced in her own life due to her Blackness. In some ways she was being told she is not worthy of claiming Blackness as an identity since she does not share a common history with African Americans. In Cristhian’s case, when he states that he does not share the slavery component he gets accused of trying to be better than them. As if by not having a slavery history makes him less Black and less proud of his Blackness.

**Beyond language and phenotype.** An interesting finding was the importance of nonverbal cues, features beyond language and phenotype, that helped them categorize others as Latina/os. Many of the participants talked about how they could identity other Latina/o just by looking at them. They referred to it as mannerisms and “the way all their



features come together” that give Latina/os a particular identifier. Although they were unable to define exactly what it is they assure me that they could identify another AfroLatina/o regardless of how prominent their African features. This finding is perplexing due to other study findings that illustrate how darker skinned AfroLatina/os were often categorized as being African. In addition, although most study participants asserted they could identify other AfroLatina/os, they also mentioned never meeting other AfroLatina/os on campus.

Participants agree it is a special skill and such differences were even observed in families. David for example, was the first in his family to be born in the United States. Since his birth he has been called *el Americano* – a particular distinction only given to him. When he would call himself Dominican he was quickly reminded that he was in fact American and not Dominican. What seems so perplexing is that his siblings, most of who are darker than him, are considered Dominican while he is not.

[Others would categorize me as] Black, *moreno* ummm (long pause) wow, ok so for me I have siblings who were born in the Dominican Republic and they are not looked at as Black. If that makes any sense. I have a brother, my brother José who is actually darker than I am very, very, dark but you look at him and you don’t identify him as African-American. There is something about him I don’t know if it’s his facial features or maybe his mannerisms or whatever it is but you automatically identify him as okay this guy is Hispanic this guy is Latino.

The categorization he is talking about is not just within his family but also in society. Despite his brother José being darker than him, Jose is still acknowledged as Dominican due to his mannerisms or that mystery factor. Since David grew up in the United States his mannerisms, the way he carries himself, and how he thinks are heavily U. S. influenced. The caveat participants talked about has to do with cultural identifications

within the Latina/o community. The mannerisms or the mystery factor are only cues that other Latina/os could pick up on, it is an in-group distinction.

Angelo has a very unique story. The teasing he endured in his family due to his prominent African features propelled him to seek knowledge about colorism. He is information rich and it has helped him critically assess his own upbringing. Angelo speaks about adopting a “cultural anthropologist” perspective of culture. When he is on campus and sees other students who he thinks are AfroLatina/os he is cautious to automatically assume they self-identify as such. Part of his hesitation comes from his own experiences and the imposition of identities. When I asked him about culture and the importance of language on campus he answered,

Language is just one aspect of culture. To me culture is religion, food, language, your phenotype, your music, all of that together makes your culture. There is also another thing that I forgot to mention under language, mannerisms certain expressions are only prevalent under certain cultures. That is a whole other study that it is even because of history or even geography so your mannerisms your expressions also play into language as it plays into culture so I don't place as much emphasis on language as other people do I think it's one of those things.

Angelo attributes “certain expressions and mannerisms to specific cultures.” He guaranteed me that he could tell the difference between a Dominican, Mexican, and Puerto Rican solely based on their mannerism and the way they interacted with others. He does not place as much emphasis to language, although it is important to note that he is not very proficient in Spanish, and when he visits the Dominican Republic that is a point of contention between he and his cousins. In addition, he categorized phenotype under culture, which is contradictory to what David suggested. There are parallels between their stories, both Angelo and David identify as Dominican but they are not seen

as Dominican in their families because they were born in the U. S., but David never endured any type of rejection in his family due to his phenotype.

The reason why Angelo decided to begin reading and conducting researching was because he wanted to understand how it was that his lineage and genes came together and manifest themselves as they did – causing him to be seen as different within his family.

When asked why it was that he was considered to be different in his family and not considered Dominican he replied,

Well... uummmm my mannerisms... I am American. I am a New York person. I am a hip-hop person. Not to say hip-hop is music I listen to but I am a hip-hop type of person you know, culturally, urban whatever. So to Hispanics that is Black... now this is separate from physical. The way you grew up your culture that is separate from being Dominican ummm out here yes you listen to rap music you might hang out with Puerto Ricans might hang out with Blacks... I would say my mannerisms, yeah.

Angelo began at the macro level and progressively worked towards defining himself as a hip-hop person. He does not resist the labeling of being American but there are layers, which he considers are extremely important, and must be understood as a cohesive entity. His mannerisms are an amalgamation of being American, a New Yorker, and hip-hop culture. It is that unique combination that makes him who he is and how he is seen by others. Angelo clearly stated that it is “separate from physical” it is an additional layer that is seldom recognized but directly impacts sense of belonging and cultural affinity.

Participants wanted others to understand the heterogeneity of Blackness. Despite living in such an international city, they felt blanket stereotypes were casted over them due to their physical appearance. Some participants found it very difficult to articulate themselves and to define what exactly set them apart from other Blacks in the United

States. Although they were adamant that differences existed. Christhian for example, had been very vociferous about setting himself apart from the overall clustering of Blacks but also from Dominican Americans. He speaks of the imposition of U. S. based stereotypes on his persona and his lack of cultural capital to help him understand why they exist.

The things about it are the stereotypes like I didn't have that in DR. The fried chicken with the purple drink, all Black people can sing and dance that's not part of my life in DR. Then I don't like the Ebonics the way they speak I guess... our language is minor... I guess that is a real trip like the people in the Caribbean's or even here, even when they are Black they have these types of mannerisms how they react or how they express themselves or how they are, it's different. That's not how I am.

He feels the imposition of stereotypes of U. S. Blacks on him has overlooked the importance of mannerism. He believes mannerism can provide rich information about the persons' nation of origin and identity. In addition to mannerisms he talks about language being another distinction but argues that it is minor compared to mannerism.

Rafael believes he had a nontraditional introduction to the Latina/o community. Despite growing up in a predominantly Caribbean community and not being exposed to the Latina/o culture, he felt he was able to receive some of that exposure through his mother. Even though Rafael is AfroLatina/o he considers himself culturally Latino since he had no exposure to his "Afro" identity.

Her interactions the way she cooks, the way she raised me, you know it is all her mannerisms everything is all Latino... and it is not that I don't inherit my Afro culture you know... it is a matter of me being in touch with it. I don't feel that through the years and mostly since its from my father side and you know my father has been absent my entire life, I don't feel that I have had the right introduction or the right way of getting into it. I don't have the mannerisms.

Again, mannerisms are used as an additional layer of authenticity. Rafael did not have exposure to those nonverbal cues and it limited his level of identification within the Afro community. Unlike other participants, Rafael was not as concerned about delineating a distinction between his type of Blackness, he felt he did not have an introduction to Blackness period and could not claim something that was not necessarily his. On campus his friends were very diverse and he did not look for other AfroLatina/os, he was more interested in making sure he aligned himself with students who wanted to do something with their future.

### **We Exist**

This final section of the chapter was titled using in-vivo coding (Saldaña, 2009). Participants kept stating that they existed, “we exist,” “we are here,” and “yes we are Latino and Black, we are both.” They want others to know that they are both identities, at the same time, and they are very proud of their lineage, ancestry, and culture. Participants reported feeling their invisibility augmented on campus. In some ways the border crossing and prejudice they encounter in society is predictable and they could prepare. On campus, not only are they crossing into an environment that has been limiting to people of color but they are also being reminded of their invisibility through narrow minds, limited curriculum, and inadequate support services. Many of them arrive with baggage in the form of negative comments, low expectations, and personal challenges that place additional barriers for their success.

Findings in this section provide a glimpse into the numerous cultural and socioeconomic factors participants need to overcome in order to succeed on campus.

**Beyond academic walls.** Participants reported not feeling validated in the classroom and/or on campus. Faculty and administrators failed to realize how much of an impact social factors played on their educational journeys. They were expected to somehow remove themselves from their life beyond the campus walls and focus solely on their education. Yet, half of the participants come from single-mother households where finances are strained. All participants reported holding a job, some even two jobs, while being enrolled and yet they are expected to overcome those barriers while still performing well academically. Participants did have positive interactions with faculty and staff on campus but for the purposes of this study I want to highlight the unique challenges participants reported – particularly because a research question is related to their persistence.

Rafael is very proud of his Bronx Native identity, he finds it as a source of pride to tell others that he is born and raised in the borough where Schomburg College is located. Yet, not all that comes from living in the Bronx has been beneficial to his academic pursuits. In his attempt to express what barriers AfroLatina/os encounter on campus he talked about the limitations the Bronx poses on students.

The Bronx. I mean it's the Bronx. There is a lot of ways you can explain it. There is a high level of poverty you see here. There is a lot of people struggling to make ends meet. A lot of people working two, three jobs, my mother is a proud owner of three jobs that she works during the school year. It's hard it is very hard to come here [campus] but when you know your next-door neighbor has all types of different people coming in and out, and you know what is going on but you don't want to say anything because you don't know what the consequences are, or you know of somebody who snitched and faced the consequences. They are not there anymore you know? It's a lot of different things, and a lot of different expectations, and a lot of different, you know, adversities against you. There's a

lot of things pushing against you. The world wants your soul essentially if you catch my drift (nervous laughter).

When Rafael is on campus he cannot fully direct his attention to his academics because there are so many competing interests in his mind. He lives in an old building, with neighbors selling drugs, his mother works three jobs, and they are consistently on alert. Their safety is not guaranteed at home and even going to campus is a huge feat. Yes, campus is located in the borough where he was born and raised but making it to campus everyday is not as easy as it seems.

Rafael was told by his high school teachers that he would never amount to anything. He grew up in poverty and without a father figure but all of that adversity has fueled his passion to succeed. He is doing great in his classes and is a nursing major – he gained admission to a very competitive program during the course of this study. Although he is intrinsically motivated to succeed, he reported having no other choice.

When I am on campus sometimes I doubt... you hear the voice in your head, you know where it leads, you know what is out there... I am at a place where you know people all around me are going to make something of themselves and I actually believe that... you know.... No matter what color you are or what identification you put down on paper or whatever your backstory is... we are all there to do something. We are all there to do good things...

Knowing that he is surrounded by others who want to make a difference in their lives keeps him motivated. He is not worried about what student services are offered on campus. He stated not really having time to get involved, his priority is to graduate, start working, and make a difference in the lives of his patients. He does not “want to fall prey to the vices of the city” and works diligently to make sure he has full control of his future.

The physical environment and his neighborhood had a significant impact on the type of resources participants could access, which in turn, had a profound impact on their academic careers. Yet, participants reported administrators not understanding the complexities of their educational journeys. David talked about the importance of a strong foundation, a home where students grow up with resources in the home to help them do homework. Unfortunately, many Latina/o students in the Bronx grow up in high poverty households. He has volunteered mentoring a group of boys for a few years and he realized the barriers he had to overcome as a child are the same nowadays.

Hispanics come from backgrounds that have different resources, so depending on the resources they have at home contributes to their outlook. I think that when you come to an academic setting that always comes into play if you grew up in a setting where you have poor resources you don't have a computer at home... that translates into your academics.

Lack of resources translates into being inadequately prepared for college. If the academic foundation is not strong initially, it will follow that student throughout their educational pathways. David is very purposeful about making sure to give back and help whenever he can. He knows those barriers exist because he had to overcome them himself. He serves as a mentor for other young Latina/os on campus providing them with feedback and guidance.

It is not humanly possible for educators to fully compensate for the lack of resources some students experience at home. Participants understand that filling that gap is extremely difficult and perplexing. There is no one solution but what they find frustrating is professors and administrators inability to empathize with their needs. During the focus group participants talked about race or phenotype being insignificant as



it relates to supporting students on campus. Anyone who is intentional and purposeful will at least attempt to fill some need gaps. However, the messaging they receive is not hopeful. Participants felt they were being told to overcome whatever barrier they had because everyone had barriers. David's statement captured their sentiment.

I think that people, White people don't really understand it. I think that uniquely it is something they can't understand because there are certain things that you have to experience firsthand, so that you can really comprehend and see how things really are. I think that in that regard when you are dealing with certain administrators they don't see certain things that other people do. I think that the White administrators try but can't really identify and I think that when you deal with people of color they don't understand those nuances, but... but you don't get special treatment for that you know? 'Ok, yeah I understand that you may come from a background where a lot of people live in a small home. So, it is not good for the privacy. It is not great economic power there, there is not a lot of freedom of expression because you know there is a little bit of resources going for a large number of people.' I think that when you have that it stunts your growth and you know administrators will comment and say 'well you know what I understand all of that but it doesn't really matter, look at where I got to... to this place you can overcome your shortcomings, your cultural shortcomings, your shortcomings at home with your family... whatever distracts you regardless. So yeah I may recognize the cultural and racial norms but you know what in the grand scheme of things, it doesn't make a difference. So, I don't think you're going to need preferential treatment to help it work.'

Participants did not report administrator's inability to support them as a purposeful or an outright racist act. They feel that White administrators cannot fully comprehend the experience of being an AfroLatina/o on campus and all of that comes attached to their identities. Most administrators did not even grow up in the Bronx and/or live in the Bronx. They cannot possibly understand what type of barriers students need to overcome in order to simply attend class.

The reality is some participants expressed being in college because they knew it was a guaranteed way to a better paying job. Yes, learning was important for them but it

was a livelihood matter. A for example, had previously been incarcerated. He was in college in order to earn credentials that would help him overcome his past.

Things that impact people academically, I think a big part is what happens at home and what is going on because when I am studying for example, I am thinking about my family I am not just thinking about studying. You can only study for so long without your mind drifting into life, my life, my family, and my family in Puerto Rico, and my family in Ecuador. Or what am I going to do with the job? All of that impacts my identity and my identity impacts all of that. So I think that if they can feel comfortable knowing that people know me and support me in understanding how identify myself and what that means on campus, and how it's going to impact me academically and beyond, because it just doesn't stop academically. I would argue that many people go to school not just because they love education but because they want to get more money. They want to have a better life and their parents. Especially as Latinos I think that it's instilled early, 'we want you to have a better life than what we did.' That is the common theme that we are told when we are young. I definitely had it much better than how my parents did and that is what they wanted that was the whole tension so I think that is a big part

He talks about the educational journey not being a solo effort. In fact, the majority of participants talked about their families being part of their academic journey. Their parents immigrated to the U. S. in order to afford their children a better future. Yet, most academic institutions do not acknowledge the overwhelming amount of responsibility placed on the student to not only learn the educational system but also teach it to their parents. Not understanding student needs directly impacts their academic success and likelihood to persist.

**Forced assimilation.** When sharing about their college experiences, many participants reflected on how the education system had impacted them during their childhood. Even as children they were forced to choose between their home culture and school, between English and Spanish – all of which impacted their cultural self-

identification. As a child Angelo attended school with predominantly African Americans, at home he only spoke Spanish so when he got to school they forced him to assimilate.

I learned English and it got drilled into my head, Destiny had the same experience I had to go to ESL. They actually forced you to stop speaking Spanish. I specifically remember that they told me to stop speaking Spanish and you have to start speaking English, watch English TV, and that is what I did until I was six or seven years old. By the time I was six or seven years old I knew English all the way. I was reading by myself by the time I was seven or eight years old. So then, I didn't have that hard-core Dominican influence in school, and school is one of the biggest places where you pick up your other culture because you are around your own. At school you become more of your own. You become generational not only are you Dominican because your family got here but you're Dominican because you have the Dominican experience over here which is what I didn't have because of how I grew up. So like I said I grew up with mostly Puerto Ricans and Black Americans. That is where my culture kinda got shaped with rap music and hanging out and basketball and stuff like that.

The forced assimilation had lasting consequences, his Spanish is limited and it has impacted his sense of belonging within the Latina/o community. When Angelo and Destiny was forced to assimilate they gave up a part of their Dominican heritage. They were seen as different in their home because as they dominated the English language, Spanish was on an equal decline.

Their AfroLatinidad did not matter on campus, on the surface it may not seem as bad, but it reinforced an English only system that operates through a Black-White binary. Now as college students, they have the liberty to identify as they wish but the reality is participants reported not meeting other AfroLatina/os until they partook on the study. Damian and Chrishtian were the only students who were purposeful about finding other AfroLatina/os on campus and they belonged to the same "intellectual student group." The rest of the participants found it difficult to meet other AfroLatina/o. Schomburg College

is a commuter campus and tends to have less student activities on campus than traditional campuses. For the most part, students tend to come to class and leave right after.

Nonetheless, even scheduled programs overlooked AfroLatina/o presence on campus.

Damian provides three critiques of campus and their inability to acknowledge AfroLatina/os. First, the college does not recruit from within the community, second AfroLatina/os are not acknowledged on campus through any formal structure or program, and third, courses on AfroLatina/os are nonexistent.

I think that if you acknowledge that there is a AfroLatino presence [on campus] and if you get students that are invested in their education. Then you have people realizing that we need to start recruiting more and specifically more people of Latino descent, Afro Latino descent, and acknowledging that this is a community where the majority of them are [AfroLatina/os]... So why are we like recruiting from these other counties and stuff? I think that when you have that self-interest you can start to make change and I think that it would definitely help with graduation rates because I think people will be more inclined to come in, and learn, and take courses here. College, and education here in this country has always been a big separation from reality and lies. Textbooks straight out lie and that has led to many people dropping out because they are like, you know, 'what? I don't see myself in this apparently I have never been part of this according to these books.' So, I think that it would definitely change [through recruiting more AfroLatina/os].

The biggest criticism Damian had about Schomburg College's was its move towards recruiting other students from surrounding areas – and not from the Bronx. Although the college is located in the heart of the Bronx and the majority of residents are very diverse, Schomburg has moved away from recruiting locally and has recently been admitting more White and international students. Yet, the three criticisms Damian offers could be beneficial for administration to hear since literature demonstrates all three of those components being critical in student persistence.

Clearly, experiences vary by individual students. Rigo grew up in the Midwest where he and his siblings were the only AfroLatina/os in their schools. When he moved to New York he discovered a whole new way of understanding his Dominican identity. He no longer felt like a minority and actually feels celebrated on campus. Their experiences are contextual. Rigo has learned to appreciate the little diversity he does have on campus because it is better than what he had when he lived in the Midwest. Yet, after his experience in the study and meeting other participants, he realized the importance of creating spaces on campus where AfroLatinidad are celebrated and acknowledged.

I really believe that more than ever now after this focus group we need a AfroLatino club, something like this, but on this campus would be a really, really amazing thing to have because we cannot be it. I think there are more, there has to be more and they are struggling and what not. I learned a lot from everyone I thank you for just, I'm just like wow!... and hearing everyone's different perspective and how they identify and how they identify differently in different places... and just not seeing others who identify as Afro Afro Latino on campus. It was good to hear the different perspectives to go along and I could see the different perspectives and I could better process where I stand and what I believe and how to accept myself more.

In many aspects participants are grateful for the opportunity to be on campus and receive an education. They did not think it was possible to have more AfroLatina/os on campus. In fact, when they were asked how their college experience would be different if others identifies as the do, their eyes lit up. Yet, they synonymously responded by saying they could not see it happening. This study's focus group was the first time most participants had met other AfroLatina/os on campus and their response was filled with joy. Story sharing helped them realize the importance of their AfroLatinidad and the need for Schomburg College to recognize them as a cohesive group.

**False education.** Childhood educational experiences clearly impact participants in the present day. Many attended inner city public school where they felt neither supported nor validated as students. The students that attended public schools surprisingly had similar stories, they were told at least a couple times they would never amount to anything. Many of their friends decided to drop out of high school in order to obtain a job, few graduated but joined the workforce right away, and a few are no longer alive. Rafael reflects on those negative experiences but also shares what motivates him to endure and persist.

As an AfroLatino I really want to make something of myself I don't want to fall prey to the vices of the city even though they're all around me. I don't want to fall prey to the expectations that my high school teachers had of me, that you know that I am just going to be another dropout or be another problem in society. That's the thing you know people do see those things its not just for Hollywood to make a buck when you hear it happens... When I am on campus sometimes I doubt... you hear the voice in your head, you know where it leads, you know what is out there... I am at a place where you know people all around me are going to make something of themselves and I actually believe that... you know.... No matter what color you are or what identification you put down on paper or whatever your backstory is... we are all there to do something. We are all there to do good things... its on us to decide.

Rafael is extremely motivated, he wants to make something of himself, and he knows what can happen if he drops out, many of his high school acquaintances are no longer alive. His motivation to persist is not so much influenced by things happening on campus as it is by things off campus. The threat is real and either he graduates and gets a good job or he drops out and learns to survive. Rafael places no obligation on college administrators to help him through college. He sees his college experience as a solo journey. The way he sees it, they cannot help him off campus, they cannot get rid of his

delinquent neighbors, or help his mom with her three jobs, they cannot help where it really matters to him.

The pursuit of a better future is what keeps students enrolled. Not one participant mentioned being in college to have fun or to learn. All of them expressed the desire to graduate and to get a good paying job. They do not see campus as a place to develop as young individual or to explore their passions. They find motivation in knowing that one day they will be in a better place because they obtained a degree. Overall, they reported discontent with their educational experiences, their inability to see themselves reflected in their K-12 educational experiences, and no courses offered on AfroLatina/os on campus has left students wondering why a college located in the Bronx fails to acknowledge the diversity within the community.

Students feel they are getting a corrupted education that only teaches what was taught in the K-12 system – a Eurocentric education. Some participants expressed their discontent with the courses offered. The college does have an established Puerto Rican studies program but even in those courses AfroLatinidad is virtually non-existent. Christian decided to enroll in a class offered through the department, the course was about the Latina/o experience in the United States, much to his dismay AfroLatina/os were covered in a small section of a book chapter. He had enrolled in the course to better understand how much of his personal experiences were based on his identity as an AfroLatino. Yet, he was very disappointed when the majority of the class focused on the mestizo experience.

The school should offer some classes or a Latino studies class... I guess I took one of the classes and they touch upon AfroLatinos in one chapter for a little bit it was just the tip, it was a plus for us but not enough. So we are here on campus, but nothing else and we are just like 'oh... put us out there.' I don't know maybe a book on AfroLatinos. Where we are, where we come from, and I don't know... maybe more you know things out there for us like *que nos pongan ahi afuera*. If you are Black and Latino but you can just pass as Latino and you say you are AfroLatino, people in the Latino community will look down on you. If you are just Black, like really Black, and then you say you are Latino, people will look down on you.

Being an AfroLatina/o is exhausting. One cannot be too much of anything without being casted as an outsider. Cristhian found it disheartening that the only mention of AfroLatina/os was in a small section of the book. There is a disconnect between what is being taught on campus and the type of students they serve, although participants did mention a move towards recruiting students from beyond the Bronx. They cautioned the move to attract outsiders could displace Bronxites who cannot, or choose to not, enroll elsewhere.

Curricula not being inclusive or diverse has left participants discontent. In many ways they expressed frustration and anger with the educational system. Angelo called them "false trajectories." He explained it being like a vicious cycle. The racial discourse in the U. S. operates off of a Black-White binary where both extremes produce knowledge that they believe is superior. The end result is the same – AfroLatina/os are ignored and it upholds anachronistic ways of viewing people.

So these false trajectories that we are taught at school from both sides from the European kind of curriculum but also the Black nationalist perspective taught to me, they are equally false trajectories because they both try to force something new into their archaic structure. It is something new that they built and they are trying to force a, you know how they have the toys for the babies ones where you try to put the cut outs in the little holes they are trying to take a triangle into a



square hole. They're trying to mash it in there that's how it feels to me. So I feel if everyone had that understanding that it is a little bit more complicated than Black and White then I think we could skip the bullshit. Then we could talk about the real issues that we have amongst each other. We can't really address colorism but how can we address colorism if we cannot even identify it correctly? When we can't even understand that we are different? If we are trying to fit into, are you White or are you Black? No! The more we have kids the more complicated it will get. We should fix it now before it gets more complicated. We are Hispanic the more we go along the more we can't call each other Hispanic. The more it will make sense because we are not going to be White or Indigenous or Black or any of that stuff you are going to be something more....

Angelo also speaks about colorism, the lack of information leads to an oversight of the intricacies that comprise colorism. He believes people are too invested in "upholding the false trajectories" and place little to no emphasis on the future. Angelo believes as the nation progresses, people will become more mixed, interracial marriages are more common now than they were before, it produces children of mixed ancestry whom will inherit archaic modes of thinking. He thinks colleges are the perfect place to engage in critical conversations, to identify and halt colorism. Yet, he has been disappointed in the lack of deviation from the status quo curriculum. Not only does he feel they overlook AfroLatina/o diversity but they also perpetrate an exclusive curriculum that supports the Black-White binary.

AfroLatina/os students at Schomburg College by default are categorized under the "Hispanic" ethnic group. Yet, I am unsure how demographic data is collected and where it is utilized. Participants shared feeling invisible on campus but that was not the biggest barrier they identified. David took on the role of being a mentor to many young Latina/os. He identified two overarching barriers directly impact AfroLatina/o student persistence on campus. The first is lack of resources students have at home directly

impact their academic persistence on campus. The second, being teacher/faculty inequitable expectations they have of Latina/o students.

I think that professors look at White students differently than Hispanic students from Black students and even Asian students... I don't think they expect Hispanics to [excel academically]... I have seen it in my English class... I felt like the professor was judging some of the Hispanic students on a lesser scale... what I was reading really sucked and as opposed to being actually critical and point certain things out, so that the individual could make certain adjustments, it's kinda like they were being told it was ok, you know, they were more complacent with lesser quality of work from his Spanish students.

David is angered by the lack of attention to detail professors place on student work. He mentioned reading papers written by Latina/o students that lacked adequate structure, cohesiveness, and overall quality. It does not impact the student immediately, however, once they graduate and are required to put those skills to test most of them would be seen as inadequate. David feels even faculty of color, which is very limited on campus, have fallen into the same predicament. They too are in survival mode, trying to blend in and not make a fuss, but the result is Latina/os students not being adequately prepared.

A major concern participants expressed was the lack of support or understanding of their first-in-family and first-generation status. Over half of participants are first in their family to attend college (see Table 4.2 Participant Characteristics as a Percentage) and although their parents understand the importance of an education, it does not always translate as support. Destiny has found it very difficult to adequately communicate to her mother the stresses and challenges associated with being a college students. She is content with her experience on campus but feels it could be better. She does not feel they have gone out of their way to help nor have they failed to provide information. Her

biggest barrier is the lack of parental involvement. She expressed her frustration in her mother's resistance to understanding the education experience.

They [parents] didn't have any time to be there or to really really support us. They didn't understand it themselves. They don't even understand it now. My mom doesn't, 'financial aid? why do I have to give them my social security? Why do I have to do this? Why?' You know and it's hard and you have to kinda of be your own support because she doesn't understand. So you have to find a way to understand yourself, and you have to go out of your way and you have to find answers for them while trying to pursue an education. While you were pursuing an education you are getting the good grades, 'ok, you are getting good grades that is great'... but you need to find the right people to hold your hands sometimes because things get hard, or you need to find the right people to recommend you. 'Ok you know you are doing good and this is what you want to do I have a program here,' you know, 'I have a program there.' It's hard because your parents don't know any of this, they don't understand, and campus doesn't help.

Her experience is a little better than other students. She was working as a work-study in the student life office. She had access to more information than the average Schomburg College student, yet she still felt lost. The parent component is critical in helping students succeed. Yet, there did not seem to be a clear indication that students knew where to access data for their parents. Not all participants were traditionally aged students but they all seemed to struggle with knowing where to access information. Schomburg College could in effect have all the pertinent data for students to access but participants reported not knowing where to look.

## **Chapter Summary**

Participants agree being an AfroLatina/o is exhausting whether it be on campus or in society. They are constantly asked to define their identities and then questioned on why they identify as they do. Some participants have encountered rejection on and off

campus, while others have learned to navigate unfriendly spaces through adopting a discrete personality. Colorism is an issue more pressing within the family unit than on campus. Some participants reported feeling rejected on campus due to their prominent African features but that was not always the case. People like Lili, A, Rigo, Rafael, Angelo, David, and Sally made a conscious choice to look beyond phenotype and ethnic categories in order to find companionship on campus.

The majority of the stories of rejection due to their AfroLatinidad were childhood based and while they left negative memories, participants did not allow it to halt their momentum or college experience. The majority resorted to self-education in order to understand their own identity since the college lacks course on AfroLatinidad.

Participants adopted a critical consciousness of their AfroLatinidad, race, culture, and future goals. They arrived at what I call conceptualization of AfroConsciousness. Like the history of people of color in the United States, AfroLatina/o students were able to create safe spaces for themselves, on campus and in their social circles. Damian and his friends are reclaiming some academic spaces on campus by meeting and holding critical conversations about the racialization of their bodies, history, AfroLatinidad, and Blackness – they are particularly interested in understanding how it impacts them. They purposefully occupy spaces on campus that were designed for learning and while other students come and go, his group of friends stay and learn with each other.

The most powerful moment for them came when they adopted a self-identification – well beyond the traditional federal categories. When they were on campus they brought with them their personal histories filled with self-hate and love,

passion and disbelief, hope and fear, and their driving force was the desire to not “fall prey to the city.” Participants were not as concerned about their student experience on campus as they were with surviving and making it to campus. Sally spoke for everyone when she said, “I am just surviving.”

Their academic persistence was mostly impacted by social cultural factors such as growing up in a tough neighborhood, living in a multifamily home, having to worry of things outside academics, and low SES. It seems rejection based on skin color, inability to speak Spanish, and due to dominant African features is more pervasive off campus. Although participants did encounter some degree of rejection, college has afforded them the ability to align themselves with other students with whom they share a common culture. Finally, they reported not feeling supported by administration or that administration even knew what their needs were. Professors seemed to be unable or unwilling to challenge the Black-White binary, even when pressed by participants, leaving them unable to learn beyond the dominant racial/ethnic discourse.

## **Chapter 7: Discussion and Conclusions**

Over the past decade the United States has been going through a notable demographic shift. This shift has in effect caused panic in some and fear in others. Nonetheless, it is an inevitable reality that we must adequately prepare to address. Scholars like Sundstrom (2008) acknowledge such fears but warns that we must remain vigilant and engage in critical conversations about race theories, color blindness, and racism within the United States. The purpose of this study was to contribute to the extant higher education literature by identifying the importance of disaggregating racial and ethnic categories within the Latina/o population. Latina/os have demonstrated tremendous growth over the past decades. In fact, between 1970-2010, Latina/os demonstrated a 592% growth compared to a 56% overall U. S. population growth (Krogstad, 2014, p. 1). In addition, there are four majority-minority states in the nation, California, Hawaii, New Mexico, and California – a trend that is expected to continue (DeVore, 2015). The Latina/o influence is not only reflected in their increasing economic power but also in the election of the president, American culture, and the educational system.

Deterministic views of race and ethnicity have created a habitual way of assessing Latina/os in social science research – including higher education. This homogenous approach overlooks the racial and ethnic diversity of Latina/os who yield from 21 different countries from around the world. In 2014 the Pew Research Center (Gonzalez-Barrera, 2015) conducted a national survey on Latina/os which revealed 35% of Latina/os surveyed stated they self-identified as mixed-race, mulatto, or mestizo. Of those who

reported being mixed-race, mulatto, or mestizo, only 13% volunteered mixed race information when similar question was asked utilizing U.S. Census style questions. In addition, those who identified as mixed-race, mulatto, or mestizo were more likely to be U. S. born (44%), non-Mexican (45%), and have some level of higher education (45%). Hence, for many U. S. Latinos, mixed-race identity takes on a different meaning – one that is tied to Latin America’s colonial history, panethnicity, and transnational understandings of race.

Demographic shifts are particularly important in education because Latina/o students are projected to be the majority school aged population by 2050 (Passel & Cohn, n.d.). Thus, demographic shifts in the U. S. are reflected in educational institutions. In fact, Latina/o students “make up nearly one-quarter (23.9%) of the nation’s public school enrollment, up from one-fifth (19.9%), in 2005 and 16.7% in 2000” (Fry & Lopez, 2012, p. 6). Similar trends are being observed in higher education. In 2010, “the number of 18- to 24-year-old Hispanics enrolled in college exceeded 2 million and reached a record 16.5% share of all college enrollments (Fry & Lopez, 2012, p. 7). Yet, despite vast racial and ethnic diversity, Latina/os are assessed through a homogeneous framework. Research findings are generalized to Latina/o sub-groups, overlooking unique sub-population experiences. AfroLatina/os are forced to not only transverse cultural, ethnic, and/or racial barriers but also panethnic prejudices and their racialization in the U. S. Ultimately, essentialist forms of *Latinidad* and Blackness coerce them to decide between their two identities – either Black or Latina/o but not the synthesis of the two.

The U. S. racial classification systems are anachronistic and fail to capture Latina/o heterogeneity. We do not really know the experiences of AfroLatina/os on campus. It may be SOC college experiences are similar but lack of research on AfroLatina/os forces educators to generalize findings. Yet, not one racial or ethnic group is analogous to AfroLatina/os. Their double minority status, panethnic identity, and cultural diversity could either provide them with more cultural capital to navigate multiple ethnic groups, or it could thrust them into rejection.

This phenomenological research study explored how AfroLatina/os mold their racial, ethnic, and cultural identities, how they negotiate in-group acceptance, and identified factors that impact their persistence. Literature suggests AfroLatina/os are forced to constantly shifting between cultures, identities, and language. Hence, the primary theoretical framework utilized in this study was borderlands theory (Anzaldúa, 2007). Borderlands theory provides a framework from which to assess the constant identity negotiation AfroLatina/os encounter. In addition, I utilized colorism (Walker, 1983) as a secondary theoretical framework in order to understand how skin tone gradient and physical features impact in-group acceptance. Colorism allows for a critical analysis of how phenotype (skin color) impacts in-group acceptance.

This research study was guided by three research questions:

1. How do AfroLatina/o college students mold their racial, ethnic, and/or cultural identities? Does history play a role?
2. How do AfroLatina/o undergraduate students at a small, urban, public college negotiate within-group acceptance?



3. What social and cultural factors do AfroLatina/o college students share that impact their persistence?

The study utilized a phenomenological approach in order to understand the embodiment of AfroLatinidad in the United States, specifically on campus. I was interested in understanding the lived and shared experience of AfroLatina/o students and how they made sense of those experiences – both on and off campus. The study was conducted at a small, public, and commuter college in Northeastern United States where 12 self-identified AfroLatina/o college students were interviewed. They all met the following research study participant criteria: (1) self-identify as AfroLatina/o, (2) be an undergraduate student at Schomburg College, and (3) hold at least sophomore standing. Since the study was interested in academic persistence, two students who were freshman were not allowed to participate in the study.

Primary sources of data collection included: (1) a demographic questionnaire, (2) two (pre and post) one-on-one, semi-structured interviews, and (3) a focus group. The study centered upon the experiences of self-identified AfroLatina/o college students and how they negotiate in-group membership. I wanted to understand the process they undergo in molding their own identities. In particular, I was interested in understanding how they negotiate in-group sense of belonging and recognize which social and/or cultural factors impact their persistence. A demographic survey was administered prior to the initial interview in order to gather additional information that may not arise during the interview. Most importantly, it provided a space for participants to self-identify by writing in their self-ascribed identity. In addition, it contained questions related to family

nation of origin and educational background, languages spoken with friends and at school, and how they believed strangers would racially or ethnically classify them. Finally, they selected the pseudonym for the study.

The interviews provided context for the complexities participants forwarded on the demographic questionnaire. There were three main reasons why a pilot study was conducted during the summer of 2015. First, to assess the feasibility of gathering data in the Northeastern United States given I live in the Southwest. The study received support from the CUNY system level and a support person was assigned at Schomburg College. That person helped secure space on campus and helped with all logistical aspects of the study. The pilot study was a success and a total of 12 self-identified AfroLatina/o students participated. Second, to secure IRB approval from Schomburg College. The study had already been approved at the University of Texas at Austin but sometimes it is difficult to secure IRB clearance on the host campus. Luckily, the support I received from the CUNY system level propelled Schomburg College's IRB to approve the study on campus. Third, it introduced participants to the study, prompted them to think deeper about their identities, and help me establish rapport.

Phenomenology consists of understanding and honoring individuals lived experiences, similarities across group membership, and validating their truths (Creswell, 2009). Hence, semi-structured individual interviews were conducted with 12 self-identified AfroLatina/o undergraduate students. All 12 participated in the initial interview but only 8 were interviewed a second time. Although all but one participant responded to the call for a second interview, we were not able to coordinate a time to meet face-to-face

for the interview. I felt the subject matter is very personal and the use of technology would not yield the same results as an in-person interview. Thus, only 8 participants were able to contribute in both pre and post interviews.

The first interview ranged from 45 minutes to one hour and a half. Some participants were very vociferous about their experiences while others were timid and guarded. The purpose of the first interview was to get them to start thinking about how their AfroLatina/o identity informs their on-campus interactions with others, and if it impacts their overall sense of belonging. The questions were arranged into four different categories: identity, cultural affinity, in-group sense of belonging, and academic outcomes. The second interview built upon interview one but asked the participants to delve deeper into the embodiment of their identities. They had three months between interviews to reflect on the questions posed during the first interview. Questions for both interviews were informed by prior research on identity development, AfroLatinidad, sense of belonging, and students of color persistence.

Throughout the initial interview, and in preparation for the second, participants kept asking about how many self-identified AfroLatina/o students had participated in the study, how they identified, and what their stories were. It quickly became evident that a focus group would yield more in-depth information about their experiences. Thus, a focus group was conducted during the second visit prior to conducting the second round of interviews. Focus groups are beneficial because they allow for a number of perspectives to be presented at once. It could prompt participants to share information they would have left out otherwise (Creswell, 2009; Glesne, 2011). The focus group had been

scheduled to last one hour and a half but participants were very engaged, it lasted two hours and fifteen minutes. The focus group followed a semi-structured interview protocol. The questions were related to colorism, AfroLatinidad, and campus experiences.

In order to assure thorough analysis of data, I conducted all interviews and transcribed all verbatim audio. Prior to initial coding, I read all transcribed notes in order to further familiarize myself with the data. Coding was conducted through the use of Atlas.ti, electronic coding software to help organize and analyze data. The first cycle of coding yielded 53 codes through the use of in vivo, descriptive, and initial coding (Saldaña, 2013). Second cycle coding consisted of consolidating codes into large themes. This process yielded 7 overarching themes that represented significant patterns or experiences across participants.

### **Discussion of Findings**

This section presents a discussion of study findings. The purpose of the study was to understand how AfroLatina/o students mold their racial, ethnic, and cultural identities, how they negotiate in-group sense of belonging, and to identify what cultural or social factors impact their persistence. Overall, findings suggest that AfroLatina/os forge new identities beyond the scope of U. S. racial and ethnic categories. They reflect on the prejudice and discrimination they have overcome and use those experiences to advance a new identity. Figure 3 provides a graphic representation of the study's findings.

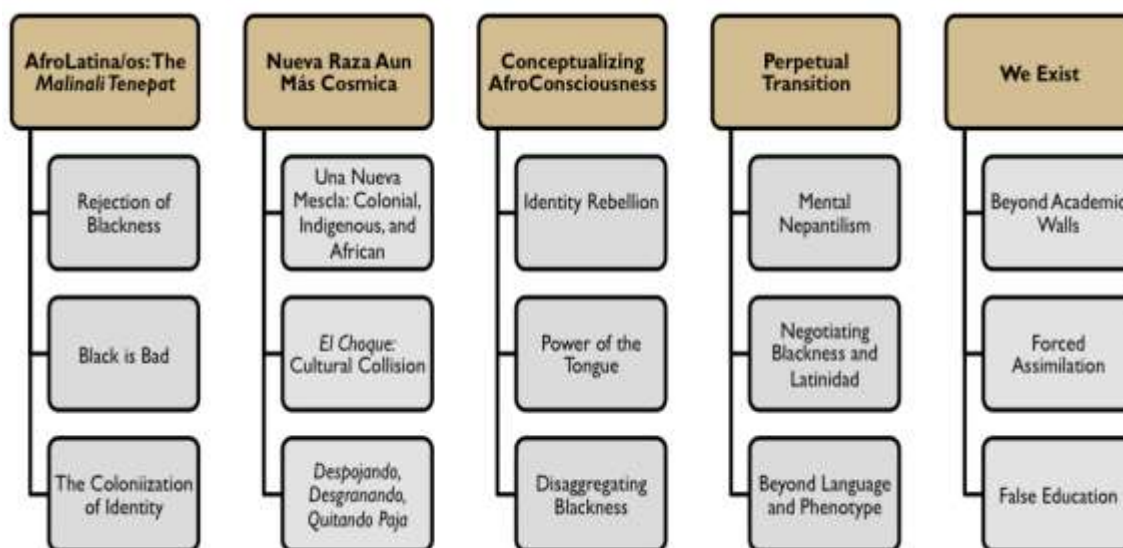


Figure 3. Overview of Findings

Three key findings emerged which help answer the study's research questions: (1) AfroLatina/o student mold their own identities by reflecting on their experiences of pain and rejection, (2) their group membership is contingent on many factors not just phenotype or language, and (3) their academic persistence is impacted by their urban environment more than other factors. The section below will present each finding in detail. This section is followed by reflection of researcher positionality, significance of the study, implications for research, practice, and policy, future research, and a chapter summary.

Key Finding #1: AfroLatina/o students mold their own identities by reflecting on their experiences of pain and rejection (Research question 1).

Identity development is a very personal process and for AfroLatina/os living in the United States, this process is complicated by having a panethnic identity in

combination with a dual minority status. Participants spoke about their personal experiences stemming from childhood and how they continue to impact their current-day identity development. Some participants had lived in Latin America and their experiences in the United States were informed through a nationalistic perspective – that is, they were viewing other AfroLatina/os in the United States as something other than Latina/os. For example, Chrishtian was born and raised in the Dominican Republic and immigrated to the United States when he was 17 years old. Throughout the interviews and focus group he made sure to differentiate himself from U. S. born Latina/os. In fact, he differentiated himself from other Blacks by saying that yes, he is Black but he is more than just Black. Yet, the definitions of Blackness changed by country. In the United States it seems almost as synonymous to African American but in Latin American countries they are seen as *negros* – which renders them non-mestiza/o.

Participants who lived in Latin America shared that race is seen differently than in the U. S. *Mestizaje* has been utilized as a form of modern rejection of Blackness. The pride and investment in *mestizaje* has leveraged the rejection of Blackness through prejudice, dismissal, and exclusion across all social sectors. Caribbean countries have a larger African mixed-race presence and thus, there is a social acceptance that Blackness exists but it is not celebrated nor acknowledged. Afro-Caribbean's cannot be publicly proud of their Blackness for they will encounter great hostility. In fact, participants share the intentional Whitening of AfroLatina/o historical figures by depicting them with European features on the few statues and paintings that exist of them. Participants from Central and South America endured greater outright prejudice than those in the

Caribbean. Blacks in those countries are mostly kept separate from the *mestiza/o* community – this separation also includes access to school, economic sector, and social integration. Three participants had lived in Central and South America, namely Colombia and Honduras. They experienced outright rejection and discrimination due to their skin tone. They shared stories of being followed in stores and getting called names by strangers who demonstrated a visible disgust of them due to their African lineage. In addition, prominent African communities are secluded from *mestiza/o* cities in a sort of exile. They are kept as foreigners within their nation of origin. Thus, their maltreatment is socially accepted and perpetrated by those who see their *mestiza/o* identity as superior.

These social components are critical in understanding how AfroLatina/o students mold their racial, ethnic, and cultural identities. Most reflected on the injustice they encountered as children in the school ground but also by teachers in the classroom. By the time participants enrolled at Schomburg College, they had developed resilience and although their childhood experiences still informed their in-group sense of belonging, they were more critical in selecting whom to associate themselves with while on campus. Most mentioned not meeting other self-identified AfroLatina/os on campus but it did not surprise them given the prejudice they had encountered due to their own AfroLatinidad. If a person could pass as something else, specifically *mestiza/o* or White, then they would in order to avoid being targeted. Nonetheless, although some of the participants' siblings took advantage of that opportunity, none of the participants could pass.

The panethnic (have lived in Latin America) piece was one of the most critical differences between participants. Participants who were born and raised in the United

States had a more complicated childhood. For some, language was critical in gaining access, or experiencing rejection, into the Latina/o community but for others it did not matter. It depended on the type of neighborhood they grew up in and the demographics of their schools. If they attended schools with a large Latina/o immigrant population then language was a significant factor but if they grew up in a Caribbean neighborhood then their group membership was based on other factors. Rafael for example, grew up in a Trinidadian and Jamaican neighborhood. However, the majority of Latina/os he went to school with were either recent immigrants or had very close-knit ties to their Latin American country of origin. Speaking Spanish was imperative for gaining access to the Latina/os group. Since Rafael did not speak Spanish he never gained access to the Latina/o student group. Yet, he suggests language is only one aspect of gaining acceptance. Language is important because it provides a sort of proof that your lineage, stories, and ancestry are not restricted to the United States. Latina/os are able to establish an unspoken connection stemming from a common language. It provides members with access to a historical passed that informs their present day experience.

Racial, ethnic, and cultural lines are more blurred than I had anticipated. The identity development process is extremely personal and largely informed by lived experiences, personality, coping mechanisms, environment, and home structure among many other factors. Nonetheless, all participants had endured some type of rejection due to their skin tone. They reported feeling judged based on the color of their skin prior to anything else. When they shared their AfroLatina/o identity it was often received with cynicism and questioning. They were asked to prove their lineage, forcing many



participants to not go into detail on how they self-identified. Initially study participants forwarded self-identifications that were within the expected parameters. They reported nation of origin, Black, or a combination of Afro and something else. However, during the focus group and in the second interview, they were more open about their identities. They had grown comfortable with the space and decided to share their true self-identification. Some even shared not necessarily identifying as AfroLatina/os but they understood the sentiment behind the term.

Their identities were as fluid and changing as the spaces they occupied. In spaces where they felt supported or validated, they shared their true, authentic, and uncensored self-identifications. Yet, they did not feel comfortable doing it on campus. Although they had developed a group of friends, their commonalities were based along cultural affinity rather than racial or ethnic identities. In many cases participants reported not feeling comfortable talking about race on campus, not even with their friends, and especially not with those who were lighter skinned. Older participants were able to better reflect on their lived experiences and how it had impacted their identity development over time. Some participants had to learn to love and almost forgive themselves for being Black or for having prominent African features. An interesting finding was the importance of hair texture across genders. Men were just as affected by having coarse kinky hair as women. They talked about the mockery they encountered within the Latina/os community due to their hair texture. The majority of male participants simply shaved their hair or kept it extremely short in order to deal with the issue.

Findings revealed colorism is a real problem within the Latina/os community – more so than language but not necessarily on campus. Participants expressed a purposeful intent in associating themselves with other students who did not have negative racial or ethnic biases. When they were children it was much more difficult to escape the prejudice but as young adults they have a decision on who to interact with on campus. In addition, since Schomburg is a commuter college, most students do not seek a traditional college experience. Colorism was not explicitly talked about as an issue. Some participants endured the worst rejections within the home through the forms of mockery, teasing, and jokes. In some cases, their nation of origin identity was “revoked” and they were considered *Americanos*, not because of their birthplace but due to their dark skin. The colorism participants endured combined with the constant border crossing ultimately led them to carve out a new identity, or identities, for themselves (Figure 4. Participant’s Aggregated Self-Identification). However, prior to arriving at empowerment they had to conduct their own research in order to understand how *mestizaje* has been utilized to exclude AfroLatina/os from the Latina/o community.

<b><u>Ethnicity</u></b>	<b><u>Race</u></b>	<b><u>Culture</u></b>
African American	African-Latin-American	AfroLatino
African-Latin American	AfroDominican	American
Afro	AfroLatino	Black
AfroDominican	Biracial	Black-Dominican-American
AfroHispanic	Black	Bronxite
AfroLatina/o	Black Dominican	Bronx Native
AfroSpic	Black-European-Indian	Dominican
Black	Black-Latino	Dominican American
Black Ethnic	Blatino	Hip-hop
Bronx Native	Caribbean	Hispanic
Dominican	Caribbean-Hispanic	<i>Hondureña-Garifuna</i>
Ecuadorian	Dominican	Intellect
Garifuna	Dominican of African Descent	Latino
Hispanic	Garifuna	Mixed
Intellect	Hispanic	New Yorker
Latino	Honduran	<i>Providencia de Santa Catalina</i>
Mixed	Indigenous-Spanish-Black	Puerto Rico
NiggerSpic	Intellect	St. Croix
Puerto Rican	Mixed	Watered-Down-American
Raizal	Mulatto	Work Ethic
Work Ethnic	Negro	
	White-Latino	
	Work Ethic	

Figure 4. Participant's Aggregated Self-Identification

What brought participants together was the rejection they encountered within both the Black and Latina/o community. Each story is unique but they all experienced some degree of rejection whether it was in society, on the playground, on campus, or even within their own family. They began to ask critical questions about why their genes manifested as they had, the more questions they asked the more intrigued they became. Thus, they began to conduct their own research. All participants had conducted some sort of internet/scholarly search about their lineage. They were curious why they were the darkest in their family, or why their genes manifested as they had, and why there was

such great diversity within their families. Some participants had developed an inner-self hate. They could not understand why they had to inherit the undesirable genes, the dark skin, and prominent African features.

Social messaging taught them Black was bad and undesirable. Most participants talked about the role media, namely Univision and Telemundo, played in the rejection of Blackness within the Latina/o community. AfroLatina/os are rarely featured and if they are, it is always in an undesirable role. Participants also expressed the need for colleges to offer a wider range of courses encompassing AfroLatinidad. It is perplexing Schomburg College is located in the Bronx, yet according to participants, that community diversity is not reflected on campus. Stepping foot on campus is almost like stepping foot in another part of town. Thus, the invisibility they encounter off campus is also mirrored on campus, just in a different form. Participants claim rather than professors teaching them about Latina/o diversity, it is the students who have initiated dialogue in their classrooms on topics that matter most to them. They call for more diverse teachers but not just ethnic or racial diversity – they want professors who engage in diversity of thought. For now, participants have taken it upon themselves to utilize services (access to the library, librarians, data bases) offered through the university to conduct their own research.

All participants reported having difficult childhoods due to their inability to fit nicely within any cultural, ethnic, or racial group. Their childhood was very complex. Many grew up in homes where their parents had a strong sense of their cultural identity since they had grown up in a Latin American country. Paradoxically, participants who had also grown up in Latin American countries did not enjoy such a clear affinity towards

their nation of origin. For example, they were less hesitant to adopt some U. S. cultural traits where as their parents completely resisted. Nonetheless, with self-education all participants reported developing a heightened sense of self-awareness, largely stemmed in their historical lineage. They all talked about their genetic makeup being comprised of Indigenous, African, and European lineage. They found agency through self-education and developed a clear understanding that the physical manifestation of their genes is just as much of an accident as the color of their skin.

History was a big factor in how they decided to self-identify, not just the history of their lineage but also their personal lived experiences. To highlight the importance of understanding stories of identity development as unique, one must look no further than the case of Lili and Pao. They are sisters and were born only two years apart. Both were born in the United States but moved back to Honduras when they were very young. Lili is older and has a very quite personality, she is soft spoken, and seems very shy. Pao, on the other hand, has a very strong presence, she is quiet but when she speaks, she speaks with conviction and assertion. They coped differently with the rejection and prejudice they endured in Honduras. They were raised in the same home, by the same parents, in the same country but they identify differently. Pao does not identify as Latina, in fact, she only identifies as Garifuna and Black. Lili, on the other hand, first identifies as Garifuna and then as AfroLatina but never only as Latina. She does, however, embrace her Latina identity and takes pride in her lineage. Their story represents key finding number one: participants mold their own identities by reflecting on their experiences of pain and rejection.

Colorism impacted their self-identification more than border crossing. Colorism was the reason for the rejection and prejudice they were forced to endure throughout their childhood and into their young adult life. Although *mestizaje* is widely accepted in Latin America as a unifying term, none of the participants reported being *metiza/o*. In fact, it became very evident *mestizaje* entirely rejects African lineage. Hence, borderlands theory helps frame the constant identity shifting they must endure in order to find consistency within their self-understanding. Nonetheless, participants found empowerment first through developing an inherent understanding of a historical past that manifests itself through their genes, and second, by learning to love themselves and their skin color. It is critical to highlight students engaged in their own scholarly search and found little to no help from the courses offered on campus. College should afford students the ability to engage in critical thought and scholarly conversations on a wide variety of issues, in this case, Schomburg College did not provide that opportunity for students – or at least they reported not having many options.

They still continue to mold their identities based on their surroundings but the biggest difference is their innate understanding of who they are and a developed sense of pride in their phenotype. Their identity is molded based on their personal experiences and how they decided to cope with childhood adversities. Not one story was synonymous but history did played a critical role in each of the participant's lives. Not just Latin American history but also U. S., which is comprised of Jim Crow, one drop rule, and slavery. Participants did report enduring a double rejection but they have learned to successfully navigate through a prejudiced Latin American society and a racist U. S.

culture. Nonetheless, they strongly believe if Schomburg College were to be responsive to the needs of the surrounding community and those of AfroLatina/o students, more AfroLatina/os would self-identify as such on campus because the environment would be conducive and validating of their identities.

This key finding illustrates the need to assess Latina/o students as a heterogeneous population. It contributes to the student development research by highlighting the need to understand their experiences as unique and distinct from their mestiza/o peers. Although colorism was expected to be a barrier in gaining membership on campus, it was not. Participants were able to find community on campus with others through a common culture. In addition, this study highlighted the complexity of a panethnic identity and how it informs student's sense of belonging on campus. I had not read about this in any SOC sense of belonging literature. Thus, it contributed to an understanding of AfroLatina/o immigrant student experiences and how they find community on campus.

**Key Finding #2:** Group membership is contingent on many factors not just phenotype or language (Research question 2).

Literature suggested AfroLatina/o acceptance or rejection into a group was more predictable than the results of this study. Participants indicated how unpredictable it was for them. In some cases language was a factor but only if it was seen in absence of mannerism, "the way the features come together." All participants assured me they could identify certain characteristics or features on people that hinted to their AfroLatinidad. However, when pressed to define those features they could not express it clearly. They felt it was more complex than simply saying it was facial features, hair texture, or even

skin color. New York is such an international city it accustomed them identifying those small nuanced differences between communities. Nonetheless, when language was the sole factor being assessed, then the inability to speak Spanish automatically casted non-Spanish speaking AfroLatina/os as undesirable. This phenomenon also applied on campus. Lili was able to gain group membership with a Latina/o group since her Spanish was impeccable – although she did have to endure some prejudiced language about Blackness but it was always dismissed as “oh, but you are different than them.”

Geography and physical location were also very important. Participants who had lived in a Latin American country were less willing to accept U. S. born non-Spanish speaking Latina/os as authentic Latina/os. The big difference in this situation is the fact they do not use color as a determining factor but rather nationality and language. They exuded a sort of nationalistic pride by speaking of themselves differently than U. S. born Latina/os. It seemed they were establishing a hierarchy of Latin/o authenticity. Those who were born in a Latin American country and spoke Spanish were at the top, followed by U. S. born who spoke Spanish, and finally U. S. born non-Spanish speakers were not necessarily considered Latina/os but rather *gringos*. U. S. born participants purported feeling rejected by recent immigrants due to their inability to speak good Spanish. Nonetheless, an additional factor was the phenotype of the Latin American immigrant. If they were light skinned or *mestiza/o* then they not only discriminated against AfroLatina/os for not speaking good Spanish, but also dismissed them all together as being African Americans. Thus, participants sought on campus group membership with individuals who reflected those ideals.



Geographic location within the United States was equally important. For example, for the participant who grew up in the Midwest, being an AfroLatino amongst African Americans complicated his understanding of self and group membership. It was not until he moved to New York that he began to understand the vast diversity within the Latina/o community. Since he grew up in the Midwest, they were the only AfroDominicans, AfroLatina/os for that matter, in the city where he grew up. Growing up he was often beat up and targeted for speaking Spanish. His siblings decided to assimilate and identify as Black in order to avoid being targeted. When he moved to New York he found himself surrounded by such diversity, including other AfroLatina/os. He developed a love and appreciation for the AfroDominican experience in the City and found refuge in Washington Heights – the Dominican enclave of New York. While he did find acceptance in Washington Heights he has found it difficult to have his full identity embraced. They see him as only being *AfroDominicano* but he self-identifies as Blatino (African American and Black). When he shares that part of his identity they often shrug him off and tell him he is *Dominicano*. Since Rigo was a minority throughout his K-12 education, being on Schomburg College makes him feel there is vast diversity on campus and he is grateful for the opportunity to fellowship with other SOC. Not only did the geographic location of where he grew up impact his identity development but it also helps him appreciate his academic experience on campus – one that Bronxites do not see as diverse or representative of the area.

Participants suggest U. S. born AfroLatina/os have no problem accepting other U. S. AfroLatina/os but guard themselves against recently immigrated AfroLatina/os. Hence,

nation of birth is most important in gaining AfroLatina/os in-group acceptance. For example, U. S. born AfroLatina/os feel a claim to the American identity while foreign-born AfroLatina/os feel they are more authentically Latina/os since they were born outside the United States. The second layer is that of language. If a U. S. born AfroLatina/os speaks good Spanish then they are accepted as Latina/o but if they speak Spanglish they are automatically considered *gringo*. I feel a need to further explain the use of *gringo* within the Latina/o community. Participants shared *gringo* is used against an AfroLatina/o or Latina/os in order to invalidate their authenticity. If a person is called *gringo* it renders them deficient in their Latinidad. Nonetheless, *gringo* is most commonly used when referring to U. S. Whites. In the case of this study, *gringo* was utilized against other AfroLatina/os in order to render them less than worthy of Latinidad.

In-group acceptance on campus was very different than in society or at work. Group membership was not based on skin color, ethnicity, language or nation of birth but rather the need to get through coursework. About 50 percent of participants were pre-health or nursing majors. They spent more time on campus than other participants since they benefited from study groups and campus laboratories. For this group of students language played a minor role in negotiating group membership. Their friends on campus were other pre-health or nursing majors. Since they were preparing for exams or learning medical terms, there was less emphasis on utilizing a language outside of English. Nonetheless, students of color gravitated towards each other and would use Spanglish to remember key vocabulary. Their study groups were very diverse and included African immigrants, Latina/os, and fewer African Americans. For those students it seems like

their major was the most important factor in gaining group membership. However, this finding is unique pre-health and nursing majors.

The sense of belonging aspect was a little difficult to gauge because even when participants were asked very specific questions regarding their sense of belonging on campus they often diverted to talking about off campus situations. Schomburg College is a commuter campus and students may only be on campus when they have class. Nonetheless, AfroLatina/os reported feeling overlooked, invisible, and unrecognized on campus. In fact, the majority of participants reported not meeting another self-identified AfroLatina/o student until they participated in the focus group. That was their first encounter to a self-identified AfroLatina/o on campus but many felt campus climate was not conducive to people sharing (or celebrating) their AfroLatinidad.

Sense of belonging and group membership was extremely complex and it depended on a variety of issues. For example, U. S. born AfroLatina/os with prominent African features decided to not align themselves with any specific group, but more often than not, they did not hang out with other Latina/os. In part because they had been rejected throughout their childhood but also because they did not feel they had as much in common with their experiences. Ultimately, their Black skin led them to a different reality than that of *mestiza/o* students. There were prejudiced undertones embedded throughout mundane conversations – something they did not want to support nor be a part of it. On the other hand, participants who had emigrated from Latin America and had prominent African features and dark skin gravitated towards African immigrant student groups. Commonalities that brought them together were: strong accent in English, dark

skin color and African features, and immigrant status. Nonetheless, as soon as they hear the participants speaking Spanish it automatically problematized their in-group acceptance. When the same participants sought acceptance in Latina/o groups on campus – they often heard negative references to Blacks but reassured participants that they were different and not included in their critiques. Some participants dealt with this hostility by staying quiet while others opted to be alone and only go to campus for class.

Colorism did impact AfroLatina/os group membership but not to the extent as had been originally suggested by literature (Cruz-Janzen, 2002; Romo, 2011). There were differences on how participants decided to navigate group membership on campus as opposed to other sectors of society. On campus their options were more limited and access to other self-identified AfroLatina/os was difficult. Colorism was one of many factors that impeded group membership others were mannerism, nation of origin, and languages spoken. U. S. born AfroLatina/os seemed to have more agency and cultural capital, which helped them navigate group membership limitations. Recent immigrants felt more limited due to their restricted English proficient and strong accent. They encountered an additional barrier, their status as immigrants automatically casted them as different than others.

Participants reported feeling unique on campus. Being AfroLatina/os on campus was more difficult than anywhere else in society. Since AfroLatinidad was not acknowledged, they described feeling alone and left out, and struggled finding other students who identified as they did. What perplexed participants more was the fact Schomburg College is located in such a diverse community but students on campus do

not necessarily reflect that diversity. The majority of self-identified Latina/o students on campus consider themselves *mestiza/o*. Hence in a very indirect way they are forced to overcome the fictitious image of what a Latina/o looks like and fall into invisibility on campus – even in a geographic location where AfroLatina/os tend to be concentrated. Not one participant reported being told outright they were not welcome into social circles. It was done in a covert ways such as prejudiced language, domination of space, differential treatment, and exclusion from conversations. Participants in turn, negotiated group membership based on a cost benefit analysis, most opted to spend the least amount of time on campus in order to not contend with inequality.

Overall, colorism and language had been predicted to be the two largest barriers for AfroLatina/os in gaining group membership on campus. However, findings illustrate there are other factors more important than simply language and physical appearance. The lines are much more blurred and intricately tied to nation of origin, mannerisms, and geography. These variables were not mentioned in the literature as being factors that impeded, or increased, acceptance into a social group. Finally, the extant literature mostly presented Black being synonymous with African American, participants talked about their interactions with African immigrants more than with African Americans. This finding helps to establish the need of viewing both Latinidad and Blackness through a heterogeneous lens.

Key Finding #3: Academic persistence is impacted by their urban environment and socioeconomic status more than other factors (Research questions 3).

The academic persistence of participants was not solely based on what academic literature posits as being most important for student of color. In fact, group membership or acceptance on campus was not directly listed as a factor during the interview by students. They discussed group membership as part of a broader acceptance into mainstream society. They did share stories about their friends, or their inner circle, but the most important factors were access to resources. The realities of growing up and living in high poverty areas had more of an impact on their academic experiences than their identities as AfroLatina/os on campus. Some participants talked about making it to campus was a journey all in itself. Their surroundings, where they lived, their next-door neighbors, and even campus itself communicated to them the difficulty of breaking the cycle of poverty. Once on campus, they did not feel validated by their professors nor administration. At the same time, they did not report feeling intentionally overlooked.

Half of the participants grew up in single-mother homes. Some even reported their mother working up to three jobs in order to make ends meet. Other students shared living in an apartment building where their next-door neighbor was selling drugs and when another neighbor “snitched” they were killed. The amount of mental strain required in overcoming such social barriers pose an imminent danger to their ability to concentrate on coursework. All participants held jobs and the majority lived in a multiple family home. Many students stated making it to campus was a feat all by itself, not because they did not want to go but rather due to the environmental challenges they need to overcome on a daily basis. In addition, they stated lack of resources posing the largest barrier to their academic success. Many participants expressed growing up in a home with limited

resources, which in turn impacted their educational pathways. They were particularly concerned with the younger children growing up in homes without access to resources and education relying heavily on computer use and the Internet. Although their parents hold multiple jobs, it does not translate into increased income, most live paycheck to paycheck and financial strains pose imminent barriers to their academic success.

A great majority of participants grew up in poverty and attended public schools that inadequately prepared them for college. Some were even told by their teachers they would amount to nothing by becoming another hoodlum in the streets selling drugs. The amalgamation of poverty, inadequate access to resources, teacher hostility, and multiple family homes has posed the greatest barriers to their academic success. A few participants attended private catholic schools albeit the challenges were the same in absence of teacher hostility. Their educational pathways have not been easy and an inadequate K-12 education directly impacts their academic performance on campus. Their AfroLatinidad is not seen as a limiting factor on the contrary, they find strength in their self-ascribed identities, because it personifies their ability to overcome adversity.

I was surprised to hear a couple participants talk about the inequitable and ineffective manner in which faculty members teach as directly inhibiting their academic persistence and future as a whole. They felt faculty members had lesser quality standards for Latina/o students and graded them with lesser rigor. David noticed this trend and right away became a sort of mentor for the majority of Latina/o students in his classes. He is an English major and prides himself on his writing. He was saddened by the quality of work from his peers and rather than the professor indicating areas of improvement, they passed

the students without regard for their academic future. Thus, AfroLatina/o students are not limited by their dual-minority status but rather inadequate education and inequitable academic standards.

Participants expressed a great deal of concern about the new type of student Schomburg is recruiting. Despite campus being in the Bronx, its student population is increasingly becoming more White because they have begun recruiting students from other boroughs, effectively displacing Bronx natives. This is particularly problematic because it will continue to cast a shadow on the existence of AfroLatina/os on campus. With increased attention placed on recruiting and retaining non-Bronxites, participants expressed concern it would displace AfroLatina/o enrollment. If there is not a critical mass of self-identified AfroLatina/os, they will continue to live in the shadows of *mestiza/os*. All participants reported being the only ones of their high school group of friends who were enrolled at Schomburg College. They had to build a new group of friends on campus but with such few students identifying as AfroLatina/os and the college being a commuter campus, their ability to find a real sense of belonging was complicated. Overall, with the college's move towards recruiting students from other boroughs, campus student demographics are becoming increasingly White, complicating AfroLatina/o student presence on campus.

AfroLatinidad is not embraced on campus by a largely White administration. Participants felt the majority of White administrators were so far removed from the realities of student's lives, making them insensitive to their needs, and not understanding how to adequately serve them. In fact, they had heard White administrators use



themselves as examples of hard work, determination, and overcoming adversity. Yet, participants took offense to a blanket statement of success. It overlooked their unique realities and the constant identity negotiation process they are forced to undergo as AfroLatina/os. Participants were adamant they are not seeking special treatment or a pass for their limited resources but feel administration should recognize them as true barriers to their academic success. In addition, there seemed to be no activities, programming, student organization, or even courses related to AfroLatinidad. There is an established Latin American, Latino, and Puerto Rican studies program on campus but the students who have taken those courses reported a tremendous gap of AfroLatina/os presence in the subject matter.

What they find particularly perplexing is Schomburg College's inability to acknowledge AfroLatina/os on campus, mainly because the Bronx has such a high concentration of AfroLatina/os. Student organizations on campus represent a variety of student identities, nationalities, and interests but there is no student club for AfroLatina/os. In fact, participants were so curious about how many other AfroLatina/os had volunteered for the study because they had never met another AfroLatina/o on campus. I do have to acknowledge that students were not thinking as critically about student services and the need to feel acknowledged on campus as AfroLatina/os. Their main concern was making sure they graduated because the repercussions for not succeeding were too great. It almost seemed like they were grateful for the opportunity to be on campus and receive an education. However, the non-traditionally aged participants noted they have not learned much in terms of information. What they have gained from

their college education is the ability to conduct better research, perfect their writing, and discern their next steps in life.

Overall, their academic persistence was impacted by their urban environment, administrators not validating them, and socioeconomic status more than their AfroLatinidad. Developing or establishing strong social circles on campus was not even a factor when considered next to their socioeconomic realities. They did mention feeling invisible on campus and not meeting other AfroLatina/o students as a sad reality but it did not seem to impact their academic persistence. Some of them did not spend much time on campus outside their classes. Most had to juggle work, life, and college which severely limited their time to spend on campus doing social activities.

Overall, this key finding deviates from student persistence literature. It is the negative factors off campus, which keep students motivated and enrolled. Low SES, inner city living, high concentration of poverty and crime serve as motivators for students to persist. This unique finding is particularly interesting since students are innately motivated to succeed and do not see the college as having any responsibility in their academic success. They have been conditioned to persist despite the obstacles and to do it by themselves.

### **Reflection of Researcher Positionality**

This study was born out of my realization about the lack of information and acknowledgment of AfroLatina/os in college and in American society. I was born in Mexico and immigrated to the United States with my family when I was four years old. I grew up in a traditional Mexican household watching Univision and Telemundo. It never

occurred to me that there were AfroLatina/os until I was a freshman in college and went to Venezuela. I recall getting off the airplane and thinking I had somehow ended up in the wrong country. I was perplexed at the vast racial diversity of Venezuelan society. I returned home after a two weeks stay with a heightened awareness of Latina/o diversity but did not reflect on AfroLatinidad much more after that. I did not question the dominant *mestizaje* ideology of *la raza*, and *Latinidad*. Little did I realize *mestizaje* was conducive to the development of a fictitious image of Latina/os. I knew AfroLatina/os existed but I did not have to think about it because it was not my reality. Eventually, AfroLatinidad would be more of concern to me than understanding my own reality as a Latina immigrant woman in the United States.

My awareness of intra-group discrimination and prejudice was heightened when I became the mother of a beautiful Haitican (Haitian and Mexican) little girl. I found myself constantly having to defend my daughter from prejudice, discriminatory language, and even standards of beauty. In some ways she was already experiencing discrimination based on her AfroLatinidad. With this study I combine my passion for education with the desire to learn about AfroLatinidad.

I was ecstatic to get started and as soon as I conducted the first round of interviews I felt an instant debt owed to the participants. They shared painful stories of rejection and prejudice but also some filled with resilience, hope, and inspiration. I found myself on an emotional rollercoaster filled with moments of anger, frustration, indignation, and contempt. After each interview I journaled my feelings and posed critical question to myself about why I felt as I did. I also had long conversations with my

wiring partner in order to unpack some of the feelings. The more stories I heard, the more I wanted to respect and honor their time, and validate their experiences. I made it my mission to retell their stories in their own words and in the same language. Hence, selecting a phenomenological approach seemed best fit. I made a conscious decision to not translate verbatim what participants had shared in Spanish. I did not want to inadequately retell their story. I am trilingual and as a native Spanish speaker I know some words lose meaning when translated, and others simply lack an equivalent in another language.

When I began the study I did everything possible to assure my personal bias would not influence or inform the study. However, after speaking with committee members they encouraged me to acknowledge my insider knowledge and to use it as a benefit to the study. I incorporated some of that knowledge in the development of focus group and second interview questions. It proved to be beneficial because participants were offering more detailed accounts of their lived experiences. Having insider knowledge also helped me explain my interest for the topic and the importance of the subject matter. I only shared minimal information related to my upbringing, specifically the fact that as a Latina I did not realize AfroLatina/os existed until my late teens. I strongly believe that helped me establish rapport with the participants and allowed them to be more candid about their experiences.

I had a very difficult time coding and identifying themes because I felt an immense responsibility to adequately portray and tell their stories. In my perspective each story is unique and equally important but at the same time I wanted to make a valuable

contribution to higher education literature. I want to honor their trust in me by telling their story and contributing to an understanding of AfroLatina/os on campus. I talked to my writing partner, my long time mentor, and other colleagues often about my findings in order to make sense of it all. The self-authored vignettes provided a great opportunity for participant's lives to be seen more cohesively rather than segmented throughout the findings. I emailed each student their vignette and asked them to make any changes they wished. Of those who responded I honored all their changes even in the original transcription text.

I feel indebted to them for sharing their stories. I was able to see the significant difference between how they presented themselves during the first interview and the evolution of our encounters. The biggest shift came during the focus group. They were ecstatic to meet other AfroLatina/os, they were more open about their experiences which helped yield richer finding. During our second interview all of those who participated in the focus group mentioned the incredible opportunity that it was for them. They were more open and candid about their struggles, hopes, and their desires for the future. There was something so powerful and inspirational about the way they carried themselves. It was beautiful to see the evolution of their self-identification and their willingness to share it with me. They exuded hope, pride, and confidence. I am still in touch with them since they had asked me to pass along any information I came across that highlighted AfroLatinidad. I hope that participating in this study was as much of a life-changing event for them as it was for me.

## **Significance**

I believe this study offers significance in a number of fields not just higher education. I drew from sociology, psychology, anthropology, Latin American studies, African diaspora studies, and ethnic studies in order to inform this study. AfroLatina/os represent a group that has largely been overseen in research since Latina/os have been studied as a homogenous group. This study offers a different approach to assessing the experiences of Latina/os and Blacks in the United States. Higher education tends to be receptive of demographic shifts considering the impact such demographic shifts have on student enrolment, academic persistence, and graduation. The educational system as a whole could benefit from disaggregating racial and ethnic groups. Although findings do illustrate many AfroLatina/os do not self-identify as such, it is very possible that they do not self disclose because the systems set in place discourage them from doing so. It is imperative that we develop data gathering instruments that would facilitate their ability to forward their self-designated racial and ethnic identities.

I understand institutions need to abide by federal data gathering standards but the literature review established the problem with Census race categories. It may be costly but individual institutions could benefit from piloting an open-ended question option for race and ethnic categories. Findings could highlight student sub-groups that have traditionally been overlooked on campus do to anachronistic data collection methods. Most importantly, in the long run such data could better inform program development, student services, and campus wide programming overall.

This study was first conducted with an intentional approach to expand the definitions of Latinidad but it quickly became apparent that Blackness also needed to be disaggregated. Participants talked about their pride of being both but they were often forced to choose. Nonetheless, the majority seemed to have a greater affinity to their Black identity since the majority of people saw them as Black before anything else. At the same time, they were culturally Latina/os and embraced customs, tradition, and holidays afforded to them through their parents and family influences. This study presents the importance of understanding Latina/os and Blacks as heterogeneous populations. AfroLatina/os are a synthesis of the two, which ironically causes them to be overlooked in both groups. Participant's stories demonstrate the importance of context, history, environment, and geography – all of which complicate generalizations about AfroLatinidad in the United States. Living in the Bronx proved to be a significant factor in their identity development, sense of belonging, and academic persistence. Their urban upbringing was both an asset and a big limitation. The racial, cultural, and ethnic diversity was considered to be a plus but it also aggregated social needs. Hence, despite being in a diverse setting participants reported needing to overcome economic barriers, safety concerns, and multifamily housing issues, all of which negatively impacted their academic persistence.

This study contributes to the lack of literature of AfroLatinidad in higher education and has the potential to impact how future research is conducted as well as to inform theory. Through the conscious and deliberate disaggregation of Latina/os, this study highlighted the unique experiences of AfroLatina/os students on a commuter

campus in the Northeastern United States. It offers a glimpse into their lived experiences, which are clearly influenced by their historical past, genetic lineage, and current environment.

Theoretically, this study represents the constant identity negotiation process AfroLatina/os are forced to endure within a highly racialized society. Their experiences have largely been overlooked and understanding how they make sense of their own identities would be beneficial in developing programs and services to support their unique needs. Dominant racial and ethnic identity models do not account for the constant identity negotiation process AfroLatina/os undergo on campus. Through the use of borderlands and colorism, study findings illuminate the unique experiences of students on campus compared to their social interactions. Findings illustrate that for study participants, their source of motivation and intention to persist were based on their fears of failure. They live in an environment that is fast phased, dangerous, and lacks social resources, they understand the intersectionality of their identities as being sources of motivation to persist and endure.

Extant student development models fail to capture the complexity of being an AfroLatina/o on a college campus. Even intersectional models are unable to account for the innate desire to persist despite adversity and overcoming the personal experiences of hate and rejection – through the adoption and modification of a new identity which is comprised of cultural, ethnic, and racial self-ascribed identities. This study yielded rich information about how AfroLatina/o students mold and shape their unique experiences based on the type and degree of rejection they encounter.



## **Implications for Research**

This study offers the diverse stories of AfroLatina/os students living in a large urban area. In some ways it provides them with the ability to be around others who may identify as they do, on the flipside, participants talked about the lack of AfroLatina/os on campus. The lack of AfroLatinidad on campus may be a result of how research is conducted and data is collected. As researchers and educators, we must move beyond a monoracial approach at assessing Latina/o and Black student experiences on campus. AfroLatina/os represent the synthesis of the two largest minority groups in the United States but both groups have largely been assessed as homogenous. Researchers must move away from the U. S. Black-White binary in order to understand the diversity that exists beyond the categories offered by the U. S. Census.

AfroLatina/os themselves are a very diverse group. Latin American countries have their unique history, culture, traditions, and population diversity. Social scientists must be cautious of how research is approached when attempting to capture ethnic group experiences. Findings must be presented as indicative of their experiences but not necessarily representative. Participants in this study were very diverse yielding from seven different countries, (Dominican Republic, Colombia, Ecuador, Puerto Rico, St. Croix, Honduras, and United States), spoke 5 different languages (Patois Creole, Spanish, English, Garifuna, and Spanglish), and self-identified a number of different ways (Figure 4: Participant's Aggregated Self-Identification) – all of that diversity was encapsulated within 12 participants. In addition, an AfroLatina/o can be comprised a number of different ways, (1) two Latina American parents – where at least one is an AfroLatina/o,

(2) one AfroLatina/o parent and one non-Latina/o Black (African American, African Immigrant, (3) a Caribbean Islander parent and a *mestizo* parent, and the list goes on. All of these factors impact the individual experience of Latinidad and Blackness.

### **Implications for Practice**

Student demographics are changing and it is an ethical imperative that student affair professionals, college teaching staff, and senior level administrators be aware of the diverse student populations. Most importantly, current racial and ethnic categories are anachronistic and should not be utilized as a form to capture student demographics. Ultimately, deterministic views of race and ethnicity have in effect thrust AfroLatina/os into invisibility. We must move beyond a monoracial discourse and begin to understand student experiences as multifaceted and unique. AfroLatina/os are a synthesis of an ethnic group and a racial group – representing the synthesis of the two largest minority groups in the United States. Their sole categorization under either group is detrimental to understanding their unique needs. However, findings indicate a need to look beyond racial and ethnic experiences in order to understand how to appropriately serve AfroLatina/o students. Environmental factors, family involvement, and socioeconomic status were among the most important factors participants reported impacting their academic persistence.

Participants live in a large urban area where social factors such as unsafe communities and low socioeconomic status are the biggest barrier to their academic success. Administrators must understand these barriers as not unique to AfroLatina/os but a reality of the communities they serve. The study was situated in a historic community

with documented economic turmoil. Schomburg College administrators should acknowledge the needs of their students and partner with local agencies to help alleviate some of those tensions. They could partner with social agencies or government support programs to provide counseling on campus. Holding resource information fairs on campus once a semester could be beneficial not only for the students but everyone in the community. Resource fairs are a great way to break down the invisible barriers that exists between campus and the surrounding community. In addition, students will have access to resources that otherwise they may not know exist.

The need to expand the academic curriculum to be more inclusive and representative of U. S. diversity was a common theme across participants. They do not see themselves reflected in the common core curriculum and even classes that were designed with Latina/os in mind overlooked AfroLatinidad. The problem of curriculum being Euro-centric and White dominant is not a unique problem to Schomburg College. College campuses as a whole have an ethical obligation to provide a more comprehensive education. AfroLatina/o students reported not feeling engaged in the subject matter because they simply did not see themselves represented. Administration need to pass a resolution where Schomburg College pledges to be more inclusive of diverse populations in their courses but also to acknowledge the diversity of the surrounding community.

What happens often with diversity initiatives is the mistake of taking an individual's experience as representative of their ethnic or racial group. Educators must understand student experiences as intersectional but not as representative of all members of that community. Findings illustrate the importance of understanding student

experiences as unique. What educators can do to support AfroLatina/os on campus is to first, acknowledge that Latina/os are not a homogenous population. By acknowledging within group diversity, AfroLatina/os can be understood as separate and distinct to *mestiza/os*. Their prominent African features and dark skin tones directly influence their social experiences. Second, understand the intersectionality of race, ethnicity, culture, and language and build programming around those identities. Poll the students and ask them to self-identify, request information from them on what they would like to see on campus. Ask critical questions: how can campus become more inclusive and supportive of your needs?, What kind of courses would you like offered?, What are programming ideas do you have? Asking critical and honest questions will yield useful information on how to serve a diverse student population. The benefit is not just for students of color but also for everyone on campus.

Campus climate surveys have been very effective in gathering rich data, which can be utilized by administrators in order to make appropriate changes wherever need is identified. Ultimately, there is a dire need to understand and celebrate the heterogeneity of Black and Latina/o student populations. Through heightened awareness comes a large responsibility to adequately serve and honor the diverse identities of students.

Acknowledging the heterogeneity of such large groups will initially prove to be a large task but will forge much needed change on campus.

### **Implications for Policy**

Ethnic and racial categories overlook the individuality of students and it creates divisiveness across marginalized people. Census data is important but if it does not

adequately capture group membership, then it disadvantages people who do not fall within the designated categories. Not only is it problematic for those who are overlooked but it also reinforces a fictitious image of who is categorized as Latina/o. It could be beneficial to look at Latin American countries to help inform U. S. Census data, particularly in Brazil since they have done a great job at gathering their countries diversity. Public education institutions follow federal data gathering procedures leading to an oversight of diverse student populations. AfroLatina/os are aggregated into the “Hispanic” category if they reported being “Hispanic” regardless of identifying as Black. Through the adoption of a more inclusive data collection methods, demographic information will be more representative of actual population demographics.

### **Future Research**

There are a number of ways to expand upon this study. Research on AfroLatina/os in higher education is scant. However, more recently there has been an increased awareness of AfroLatinidad in the United States through social media outlets. It is imperative race and ethnicity be assessed and understood beyond the scopes of U. S. Census categories. The homogenous approach researchers have adopted in assessing the experiences of Latina/o and Black communities has led to generalizations about their experiences. Yet, Latina/os represent 21 different Spanish speaking countries from around the world, each country has its own culture, history, music, food, customs, and even variations of the Spanish language. To suggest that an ethnic category could capture such diversity is ridiculous. Similarly, Blacks are also extremely heterogeneous. This racial category includes African Americans, African immigrants, and AfroLatina/os

among others. Thus, researches must move beyond a monoracial and monethnic approach to understanding the Black and Latina/os experience in the United States.

Future research could delve into intersectionality of individual identities (i. e., nation of origin, phenotype, language spoken) and how they impact AfroLatinidad and sense of belonging on campus. For example, study findings indicate foreign-born AfroLatina/os undergo a different identity negotiation process than U. S. born AfroLatina/os. An individual identity intersectional approach would better illustrate why those nuances exist. In addition, assessing how their experiences differ by institutional context (i. e., PWI, HSI, HBCU, 2/4 year) and geographic location could illuminate nation of origin specific factors. For example, the Pacific Coast has a larger Mexican population hence the experiences of Blaxicans could differ from AfroLatina/os in the Bronx. Finally, disaggregating by major and the use of different theoretical lenses could lead to different findings.

This study included a wide range of ages, future studies could focus on understanding the experiences of non-traditionally aged students, AfroLatino males, the intersection of AfroLatinas and nation of origin, etc. The study of AfroLatina/os in higher education is an emerging field and the research possibilities are many.

## **Summary**

This chapter offered a discussion of key findings of this study. The three key findings emerged which helped answer the study's research questions. The first research question, how do AfroLatina/o college students mold their racial, ethnic, and/or cultural identities? Does history play a role? This question was answered by assessing the

personal and lives experiences of pain and struggle participants endured. Yet, their personal journeys were filled with resilience, authorship, and empowerment. They acknowledge the importance of understanding history in not only their cultural identification but also their genetics. The second question, how do AfroLatina/o undergraduate students at a small, urban public college, negotiate in-group acceptance? They do it by understanding themselves. Their group membership is contingent on many factors not just phenotype or language. The third question, what social and cultural factors do AfroLatina/o college students share that impact their persistence? Their academic persistence is impacted by their urban environment and socioeconomic status more than any other factors.

Each key finding was accompanied by a brief explanation. Other sections included a reflection of researcher positionality, significance of the study, implications for research, practice, and policy, and future research.

## Appendix



## Appendix A: Demographic Questionnaire

### AfroLatina/o Student Identity Demographic Questionnaire

1. Name \_\_\_\_\_ Pseudonym \_\_\_\_\_
2. Gender \_\_\_\_\_ Age \_\_\_\_\_
3. I currently am a: ☐ Freshman ☐ Sophomore ☐ Junior ☐ Senior
4. Do you speak Spanish at home? ☐ Yes ☐ No
5. Do you speak Spanish with friends? ☐ Yes ☐ No

#### Identity & Nation of Origin Questions

6. I was born ☐ in the United States ☐ Outside the U. S. \_\_\_\_\_
7. My father's nation of origin is: \_\_\_\_\_
8. My mother's nation of origin is: \_\_\_\_\_
9. I self-identify as (racial/ethnic identity): \_\_\_\_\_
10. Others may identify me as (racial/ethnic): \_\_\_\_\_

#### Family & Education

11. Did either of your parents attend college?  
☐ Yes (answer sub questions) ☐ No (go to question 10)  
9a. Who? \_\_\_\_\_  
9b. Highest degree completed: \_\_\_\_\_
12. Did any of your siblings attend college?  
☐ Yes (answer sub questions) ☐ No  
10a. Who? \_\_\_\_\_  
10b. Highest degree completed: \_\_\_\_\_

## **Appendix B: Recruitment Email**

Peers & Colleagues,

My name is Claudia García-Louis, I am a doctoral student at the University of Texas at Austin and am conducting a study on AfroLatina/o student experiences on college campuses. I am seeking volunteers to be interviewed for this study. In order to participate you must self-identify as AfroLatina/o and be a college student.

The study consists of one face-to-face interview. The questions are semi-structured and deal with AfroLatina/o identity development, college experiences, and ethnic/cultural affinity. The interview will be about 40-50 minutes long and all participants will be entered in a drawing to win a \$100.00 gift card for their participation. Participation in this project is completely voluntary, and participants may withdraw from this study at any time without penalty, prejudice, or loss of benefits.

All interviews will be kept anonymous. If you would like more information about the study or would like to participate please e-mail Claudia García-Louis at or call 503 863-4700.

Thanks so much,

Claudia García-Louis, M.A.

## Appendix C: Flier Posted on Campus

### Study Participants Needed AfroLatina/os Negotiating Identity

Do you identify as AfroLatina/o?

Are you an undergraduate student at Schomburg College?

Share your experiences!

The study consists of one face-to-face interview. The questions are semi-structured and deal with AfroLatina/o identity development, college experiences, and ethnic/cultural affinity.

The interview will be about 40-50 minutes long and all participants will be entered in a drawing to win a \$100.00 gift card for their participation.

Participation in this project is completely voluntary, and participants may withdraw from this study at any time without penalty, prejudice, or loss of benefits.

For more information contact Claudia García-Louis, M. A.  
Email: [cgarcialouis@utexas.edu](mailto:cgarcialouis@utexas.edu) Phone number: 503 863-4700

Claudia García-Louis  
[cgarcialouis@utexas.edu](mailto:cgarcialouis@utexas.edu)

Claudia García-Louis  
[cgarcialouis@utexas.edu](mailto:cgarcialouis@utexas.edu)

Claudia García-Louis  
[cgarcialouis@utexas.edu](mailto:cgarcialouis@utexas.edu)

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[cgarcialouis@utexas.edu](mailto:cgarcialouis@utexas.edu)

Claudia García-Louis  
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[cgarcialouis@utexas.edu](mailto:cgarcialouis@utexas.edu)

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Claudia García-Louis  
[cgarcialouis@utexas.edu](mailto:cgarcialouis@utexas.edu)

Claudia García-Louis  
[cgarcialouis@utexas.edu](mailto:cgarcialouis@utexas.edu)

## Appendix D: Campus Newsletter Announcement

Dear [REDACTED] Undergraduate College Students,

I am writing to invite you to participate in a research study on AfroLatina/o students. The study seeks to understand the experiences of AfroLatina/o students on college campuses. I am looking for volunteers who identify as AfroLatina/o to be interviewed for this study. The interview will be about 40-50 minutes long and all participants will be entered in a drawing to win a \$100.00 gift card for their participation.

Individual interviews will be held on **Monday, July 20<sup>th</sup> through Tuesday, July 21<sup>st</sup> in the Student Life Building**. If you would like more information about the study or would like to schedule your participation please e-mail Claudia García-Louis at [cgarcialouis@utexas.edu](mailto:cgarcialouis@utexas.edu) or call 503 863-4700.

Thanks so much,

Claudia García-Louis, M.A.

## **Appendix E: Email Confirmation**

Mr./Ms. (Last name)-

Thank you very much for your willingness to participate in the AfroLatina/o study. I am planning on conducting interviews on July 20th and 21st in the Student Life Building room to be determined. Do either of those dates work for you? I am planning on starting the first interview at 10am on both days. Please indicate which date and time works best for you.

Also, do you know of other students who also identify as AfroLatina/o who would be interested in participating? I would greatly appreciate your help in passing along my email for participants to your friends/colleagues/fellow students.

Finally, do you have any questions for me? Feel free to email or call me on my cell 503 863-4700.

Best,

Claudia García-Louis, M.A.

## Appendix F: Pilot Study Questions

INTERVIEW CONSTRUCT	INTERVIEW QUESTIONS
<b>Identity</b>	How do you identify racially? Why?
	Have you found it difficult to classify yourself racially and ethnically? If so, how so?
	How do you think a stranger would racially categorize you? Why?
<b>Cultural Affinity</b>	How do you identify culturally?
	Is language an influential factor in how you identify culturally?
	Would you say your cultural identification is the same as how your parent(s) identify? Why?
<b>In-Group Sense of Belonging</b>	How would you describe your group of friends on campus? What are similarities that bring you together?
	Do language or culture influence who you hang out with on campus? If so, how?
<b>Academic Outcomes</b>	Do you feel your cultural identity is embraced/acknowledged on-campus? How does it feel?
	What would you say are the most important components to helping AfroLatina/o students succeed academically?

## **Appendix G: Student Consent to Participate In Research**

### **CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH: Individual Interviews**

Title: Negotiating Identity: How AfroLatina/os' in-group sense of belonging impacts persistence  
Conducted by: Claudia García-Louis, The University of Texas at Austin (PI)  
Department: College of Education, Department of Educational Administration  
Telephone: 503-863-4700  
Email: [cgarcialouis@utexas.edu](mailto:cgarcialouis@utexas.edu)

You are invited to participate in a research study to help us understand the experiences of AfroLatina/o students in higher education. This form provides you with information about the study. Please read the information below and ask any questions you might have before deciding whether or not to participate. Your participation is entirely voluntary and you can stop participation at any time and your refusal will not impact current or future participation with UT Austin. The researcher will provide you with a copy of this consent for your records.

#### **Purpose of the Study**

This study is being conducted by Claudia García-Louis, a third year doctoral student at the University of Texas at Austin, as part of her dissertation research project. You are invited to participate because you self-identify as AfroLatina/o and your insight can help us better understand how to ensure that the experiences of AfroLatina/o students are understood and utilized to better serve them on college campuses. We ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

#### **Procedures**

If you consent to participate in this study, you will take part in a 45- to 60-minute individual interview with the researcher. During the session, we will ask you questions about your own experiences and views about how AfroLatina/o experience/navigate their identity on college campuses. The individual interview will be audio taped and later transcribed.

I agree to be audio recorded during the course of the focus group \_\_\_\_\_ (please initial).

#### **Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study**

The study poses minimal risks. As the study seeks to understand your experiences as an AfroLatina/o on a college campus, you may feel uneasy answering some of the questions that ask you to reflect on challenges and obstacles you have encountered on your college pathway. You may elect to not answer any of the questions with which you feel uncomfortable and still remain a participant in the study.

You may or may not benefit personally from your participation in this study. However, this research addresses important issues on how AfroLatina/o students negotiate racial/ethnic identity and their experiences on college campuses. Furthermore, you may derive benefit from reflecting on your own experiences.

#### Compensation

As a participant you will be entered in a drawing to win a \$100.00 gift card, winning is not guaranteed.

#### Confidentiality

In any report I may publish, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a participant. I will use pseudonyms for all participants in all transcripts and reports. Research records will be kept in a locked file; only the researcher will have access to the records. The tapes may be kept for up to 1 year and will be securely stored Claudia García-Louis. Within that timeframe, and after the data are collected and transcribed, the recordings will be erased or disposed of.

#### Participation and Withdrawal

Your participation in this study is strictly voluntary and will not affect your current or future relations with your respective employers. You are under no obligation whatsoever to answer any questions or discuss anything that you are not inclined to answer or discuss. If you choose not to answer specific questions, you may still remain in the study. You are free to withdraw from the individual interview at any time.

#### Contacts and Questions

The researcher conducting this study Claudia García-Louis, UT Austin. If you have any questions or concerns about the research, you may contact Claudia García-Louis at [cgarcialouis@utexas.edu](mailto:cgarcialouis@utexas.edu) or (503) 863-4700.

#### Rights of Research Participants

You may withdraw your consent at any time and discontinue participation without penalty. You are not waiving any legal claims, rights, or remedies because of your participation in this research study. If you have questions regarding your rights as a research subject, please contact Jody Jensen, PhD., Chair the University of Texas at Austin Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects at (512) 232-2685 or the Office of Research Support at (512) 471-8871 or email [orsc@uts.cc.utexas.edu](mailto:orsc@uts.cc.utexas.edu).

#### Statement of Consent:

I understand the procedures described above. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I agree to participate in this study. I have been given a copy of this form.



Name of Participant

---

Signature of Participant

Date

---

Signature of Researcher

Date

## **Appendix H: Focus Group Questions**

### **Focus Group Questions**

1. What do ethnic categories like Hispanic and Latino mean to you?
2. What process did you undergo in creating your self-identity?
3. Does your physical appearance or color play a role in how you identify? If so, how?
4. Do you feel your self-ascribed identity is validated or acknowledged on campus?
5. What do you think are the biggest barriers AfroLatina/os encounter on campus? Why?

## **Appendix I: Initial Coding List and Descriptions**

<b>Code Name</b>	<b>Code Description</b>
Language Matters	Language is important in being accepted and treated as Latina/o
Latinos Reject Blackness	Latinos discriminate against Blacks because of their skin color
Educational Experiences	They speak about their educational experiences as a child and in college
Panethnic Identity	They hold ties to their parent's nation of origin; identify across nations
Country Matters	This code highlights the differences between experiences in the US v. Latin America
Black is bad	Being Black is seen as something negative; being Black carries a negative association/connotation
Interactions African Americans	Experiences and interactions with the African American population in the US
Geography/Country + Identity	How geography impacted their identity development
Selecting Identity	Participant selects identity based on what is best at the time
Motivation + Awareness	They have reached awareness by their own means; they are motivated to forge change; hopeful for the future
American Experience	Experience particularly tied to them living in the United States
Difficult to Identify	They express why they find it difficult to identify
Skin Color + identity	Skin color plays an active role in how they identify
Acknowledge AfroLatina/os	They feel their AfroLatina/o identity is overlooked; ignored; not seen

Latino US Reality	Things (ie. experiences, opportunities, challenges, etc.) unique to being a Latina/o in the US
Genetics + Lineage	They make claim of their lineage being more attached to their genes than their nation of origin or skin color
Academic Barriers	Obstacles that prevent them from succeeding academically; from childhood to present day
Discrimination Based on Skin Color	AfroLatina/os who experience discrimination because they are considered to be dark skinned
History matters	History needs to be understood; there is a historical connection to their identities & experiences
Cultural Self-Identification	How the student self identifies culturally
Forms of Discrimination	These are examples of how AfroLatina/os are discriminated against by others
Growing Up	Important experiences growing up that shaped their current situation
Campus friends	Who the student hangs out with on campus
Nation of origin= identity	They identify their nation of origin as their identity
Parents Identity Shared	The participant shares cultural, racial, and/or ethnic identities with their parent(s)
Music	"In vivo code" There is a connection between music, their identity, and/or connection to others
Physical Features	"In vivo code" Physical features are seen as important in their own experiences or how others treat them
Black, European, Indigenous Mix	Recognize that they have mixed ancestry of all three: Black, European, and Indigenous
Childhood + Identity	How the participants children understand race and identity

Within group stereotypes	Negative perceptions of each other within the Latino community
Others Classification depends on Location	Location directly impacts how others racially categorize them
Mothers Influence	How the participant's mother has impacted or influenced their identity
Negative Stereotypes	Any form of negative stereotype against any other community outside the Latino Community
Racial Self-Identity	Participant has selected their racial identification
Slavery	"In vivo code" Acknowledgment of slavery in ancestry; slavery was mentioned in connection to their identity
Benefit of not being Black	Why its easier to not identify as Black
Colonization	"In vivo code" They speak about the history of colonization and how it relates to them.
Not Latino Enough	There are some aspects or characteristics of the person that denied them membership in the Latina/o community.
Racial Mixture	"In vivo code" they described themselves and their identity as a racial mixture
Ethnic Self-Identity	How the student self-identifies ethnically
Father Influence	How the participant's father has impacted or influenced their identity
Jokes	"In vivo code" family members and/or friends have a number of racial jokes, either directed at the participant or other dark skinned individuals
Spanish on Campus	Students using Spanish on campus
Africans Ok	Africans from Africa are seen as acceptable

AfroLatino Study	Direct consequences of participating in the study; focus group
Melting Pot	"In vivo code" They refer to New York as a melting pot where many cultures, races, nationalities come together
Single Mom	"In vivo code" the participants reflect on their experience of being brought up by a single mother and how that impacted/informed their experiences
Mannerisms	"In vivo code" they identified mannerisms being connected to identity, nationality, and/or race
Academic support	Areas where they need additional support to help them succeed academically.
Pronouncing name	"In vivo code" the impact Americanizing their name had on their experiences
European Ancestry	"In vivo code" Acknowledge their White European side
Indigenous Ancestry	"In vivo code" Acknowledge ancestry
Shift in Powers	The Latino community is growing in the US

## **Appendix J: Second Cycle Coding**

### **1. Composition of Identity**

- Benefit of not being Black
- Campus friends
- Difficult to Identify
- Growing Up
- Interactions African Americans
- Mannerisms
- Melting Pot
- Motivation + Awareness
- Not Latino Enough
- Physical Features
- Selecting Identity
- Skin Color + Identity

### **2. Education**

- Academic Barriers
- Academic support
- Acknowledge AfroLatinos
- Campus friends
- Educational Experiences
- AfroLatino Study

### **3. Family Influence**

- Father Influence
- Mothers Influence
- Single Mom

### **4. Geography of Identity**

- American Experience
- Childhood + Identity
- Country Matters
- Cultural Self-Identification
- Ethnic Self-Identity
- Genetics + Lineage
- Geography/Country + Identity
- Latino US Reality
- Music
- Nation of origin= identity
- Others Classification depends on
- Location
- Panethnic Identity
- Parents Identity Shared

## Racial Self-Identity

### **5. History**

- Black, European, Indigenous Mix
- Colonization
- European Ancestry
- History matters
- Indigenous Ancestry
- Racial Mixture
- Slavery

### **6. Language**

- Language Matters
- Pronouncing name
- Spanish on Campus

### **7. Rejection of Blackness**

- Black is bad
- Discrimination Based on Skin Color
- Forms of Discrimination
- Jokes
- Latinos Reject Blackness
- Negative Stereotypes
- Within group stereotypes



## **Appendix K: Second Round Interview Questions**

### **AfroLatina/os Round Two Interview Questions**

1. Can you tell me how you identify culturally/ethnically/racially? Why?
2. Can you tell me if your identity has evolved over time? If it has how so?
3. How does your identify influence how you see yourself or how you act?
4. Do you identify the same as your family members? Why or why not?
5. When you are on campus do you feel validated and your identity acknowledged?
6. How would your college experience be different if there was a critical mass of students who identified as you do?
7. What would you like others to know about your experience as an AfroLatina/o in the US and/or college campus?

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